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THE EXPERIENCES OF CLASS AND GENDER RELATIONS AND WOMEN WORKERS
AT GEC 1945-1965

by

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To

University of Warwick

The Department of Sociology

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Dedicated To My Parents

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ABSTRACT

This study is an ethnographic account of the experiences of a group of women workers at the GEC in Coventry during the post-war decades from 1945-1965. The company since its establishment grew from a single plant to a large multi-national company emerging as the major employer of female labour in the Co-entry labour market. In outlining the emergence of the company as a major employer of women this thesis takes account of the character and development of the local labour market -thus providing a framework in which to contextualise the growth and character of the GEC as a 'woman's factory'. A major theme of the thesis concerns the ways women experienced the sexual division of labour, and the way this impinged upon their job choice and preference for the GEC. This question is organized around their experiences of recruitment, selection of working patterns and patterns of wages within the company. A second important theme concerns workplace culture -when the character of management's and women's role will be considered as a feature in the construction of female stereotypes in terms of jobs and skills. Another key theme in the thesis considers women's experiences of skill, training, job experience, promotion and the changing character of job and gender boundaries -whilst exploring such experience within the context of gendered skill and job hierarchies. The question of management control and its implications for women's experiences constitutes a further important theme. Within this context women's experiences and ways of coping with a variety of management strategies are considered -whilst highlighting the character of change, the fragmentation of work and the importance of gender in shifting labour market conditions. The final theme considers women's perceptions and experiences of resistance and trade union organization.

Glomary

AUEW
BTH
CP
EEF
GEC
JSSC
M.DW
PBR
TGWU
WW1
WW2

= AMALGAMATED UNION OF ENGINEERING WORKERS
= BRITISH HOUSTON THOMSON
= COMMUNIST PARTY
= ENGINEERING EMPLOYERS FEDERATION
= GENERAL ELECTRIC COMPANY
= JOINT SHOP STEWARDS COMMITTEE
= MEASURED DAY WORK
= PAYMENTS BY RESULTS
= TRANSPORT AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION
= WORLD WAR ONE
= WORLD WAR TWO

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction To The Study Of Women Workers At GEC.

Introduction

This study examines the experiences of female manual workers employed during the post war period in electrical engineering in what is now a large multi-national company. Throughout this period the GEC constituted an important source of employment for women living in the Coventry area. The decision to focus on this particular employer emerged through living, working and studying in the local community and my own interest in the character of women's work, and particularly in the sexual division of labour. At a superficial glance local people had a very clear sense of the job market, its foundations, and gender patterns. Male workers were employed in the 'motor industry' while women found work in the 'women's factory' the GEC. Such a perception conveyed a strong sense of a deeply entrenched sexual division of labour. I was interested in how such work patterns persisted bearing in mind studies such as Summerfield (1977) and Braybon (1981) which portray women's contribution to the war economy, the disruption of traditional work and gender patterns and the major role women had played in different sectors of the economy, but particularly in 'male work' in the engineering industry. Moreover, the emergence of a wealth of feminist literature on the issue of women and work, and particularly ethnographic studies focused attention on the resilience of the sexual division of labour, and the plight of women as unskilled and low paid workers. The image presented of women workers in studies published during the early 1980s (Pollert 1981 and Cavendish 1982 among others) was that they occupied the lower end of the labour market, carried out the least skilled jobs in increasingly labour intensive operations at very poor pay rates and with little job security.

It also seemed that while the labour process debate generated a major interest in the changing nature of work and skill, this interest involved persistently pursuing a number of crucial themes but glossed over others. For instance there was much concern with the organizational strategies and use of technologies as a management methodology of control in the pursuit of profit and its subsequent effect on workers, but this rarely took account of gender. The wage labour relationship was assumed to be a relationship between men and capital. For instance most

of the studies appeared to concentrate on male workers and the ways their traditions of work and skill had been eroded, or the way in which male workers rationalised and endured unskilled work. While there was a general acceptance that women did unskilled work, the notion of work, competence and skill among such women was not investigated. The exception to this approach was the pioneering work of Phillips and Taylor (1980) who began to raise the question about the links between gender and skill categories. Both the widespread failure to integrate these topics and the issues raised by Phillips and Taylor (and later Cockburn) suggested that there was a need to consider the question of worker competence from women's perspective and to highlight their views on the kinds of semi-skilled jobs characterising women's work, and their notion of skill, experience and expertise in relation to such work. Therefore one of my central concerns in this thesis is to consider such features from the women's perspective, to outline and to examine their experiences, and to locate this lived experience in relation to changes and development in the organization of work and the institutional definition and recognition of skills at the QEC. Since most of the women I interviewed had many years of practical work experience I particularly wanted to investigate in what ways this experience counted and to whom? In this context both the management and the women's views will be elucidated.

A further concern has been the question of workplace culture. Among others Westwood (1984) makes much of women worker activities and the practice and influences of domesticity and sexuality in the workplace. This is presented as both a challenge and a compromise in relation to management pressures, while it is also presented as a re-constitution of 'woman' in the workplace. Cockburn develops the parallel argument that male workers activities also reconstruct masculinity in the workplace. In both instances this emphasis is almost exclusively on the role of the workers themselves, implying that managements are not involved. Although one of my concerns is to chart the culture of femininity and reproduction at the QEC as an experience articulated by the women concerned, I also tentatively raise questions about management's role at the QEC. In doing so I also comment tentatively upon possible links between the character of workplace culture and representations of women's competence.

Another essential aspect of any explanation of women's experiences of work concerns the power relations in the workplace, their character and how they operated in the control of the women concerned. In order to explore this question I intend to examine the processes involved in the construction of jobs, and the ways the women experienced such jobs. This means I will explore a range of activities involving the management and the male workers. While several important studies, such as, Burawoy (1979) have offered a sensitive and informative perspective on the character of workplace control they have generally ignored the question of gender. This important facet of control has however been a central concern of much of the feminist ethnographic work such as Cavendish (1982). Any examination of the processes of workplace control for women must seek to address both class and gender relations. Therefore I have drawn on a number of the more conventional approaches such as Edwards (1979) and Thompson (1983) so as to contextualise the changing character of the labour process and women's place in it. I explore a range of controls experienced by the women, and focus on a range of interlinked control processes, which include organizational, technical and gender change in the job structure together with the ways the women coped in such circumstances. Having outlined these patterns of control and work organisation I will also discuss the character of resistance and the responses and strategies presented by the women. In this context I will take account of organized and unorganized worker strategies but highlight the role of the trade unions, and women's perceptions of such organization. Here and elsewhere in the thesis the significance of gender in forms of acceptance and resistance will be explored.

A central concern of this thesis from a methodological viewpoint is to allow women to speak for themselves, to articulate their understanding of the dynamics of workplace relations, and patterns of work organization. Much of the thesis is concerned with exploring the skills and competences of the women I interviewed. However, it is also necessary to contextualise their experiences, for they form only a small part of the local labour market, and only part, though a very significant part, of the QBC workforce. I will now outline the way in which I have organized my discussion of content and experience to express the themes I have summarised above, by listing the sequence of chapters which follow.

The next chapter attempts to convey some sense of the changing character of the local labour market from the mid 19th century onwards. It seeks to portray trajectories of change and consistency in both product and labour market developments, and the implications for patterns of employment and women's role in the local economy.

In my third chapter I provide an outline of the founding and growth of the GEC in Coventry and its emergence as a 'women's factory.' In doing this I intend to provide an outline of the significance of women's employment at the GEC, and its relationship to the developments in the product market, labour process, job structure and payment systems characteristic of other Coventry factories.

In the fourth chapter I use my interview material to look at the GEC through the experiences of the women I interviewed; and in doing so I organize the material around the similarities and differences in their patterns of experience. I also draw on interviews with a number of managers, the purpose of which was to gain some insights into company employment practices and policies. This chapter is concerned with three themes: the women's preference for employment at GEC; their experiences of the particular job structure, specifically part-time work and the question of wages. Such themes are organized in three corresponding sections. In order to elaborate these themes, I consider the similarities and differences of experience of women in different generational cohorts, of different social status and varied origin.

Chapter five explores an important feature of workplace organization, namely workplace culture. As already stated some recent ethnographies of women at work have identified a distinctively female workplace culture, particularly highlighting the celebration of the reproductive aspects of femininity. The character of such a phenomenon has been presented as contradictory in terms of worker consciousness but also as a form of resistance by women workers. This too was a prominent feature of workplace culture at GEC. While this complex phenomenon has been largely attributed to the responses of female workers in mediating and in coping with the more oppressive nature of workplace practices, I will consider whether it may also be part of management strategies in managing women workers. In developing this analysis I do not seek to

undermine its importance as a female worker activity, but to illustrate neglected aspects of the construction of femininity in the workplace.

Chapter six is divided into several sections and investigates more closely the character of semi-skilled work and the notion of skill. In the first section I review a range of literature concerning conceptions of work, gender and skill, as a basis for contextualizing the experiences and the impressions of the women interviewed. In the second section I refer to the attitudes expressed by a range of managers concerning the question of skill and the kinds of semi-skilled labour characterising women's work at DEC. In the third section I use interview and other material to outline some of the work tasks and try to convey the kind of demands made on the women concerned. The purpose of this is to allow the women themselves to describe the tasks and activities which constitutes women's work and to highlight and elaborate on its complexities and difficulties from their perspective. This provides the context for the next three sections. Following this, in the fourth section, I look more carefully at the aims, purpose and quality of training. I argue that training programmes and 'on the job experience' represent evidence of expertise. In a fifth section I explore the hierarchy in the job structure possibilities for promotion and any ways in which the experience or expertise of women workers were recognized by management. In the sixth and final empirical section I examine some examples of the organization of job and gender boundaries as well as taking generational features in the presentation of 'skill' definitions into account. Some of the implications of this material are then discussed at the end of the chapter.

Chapter seven examines influences on the changing patterns of control for women. I identify several facets of management control strategies as well as seeking to explore the gendered nature of control. Using my material I locate women's experiences of control in a variety of work settings within the company, highlighting shifts and changes involving the fragmentation of work, the importance of gender and shifts in labour market conditions.

In my eighth chapter I examine women's perceptions of resistance and trade union organization. Since many factors influence the character of resistance, what I present is not a systematic or chronological picture of resistance, rather what I want to convey is some sense of patterns or

forms of resistance and trade union organization. In doing this, I comment on low key resistance, unorganized challenges to management and resistance through organized collective activity. One of my main aims is to demonstrate some sense of the importance and the character of the complex interplay of class and gender in the subordination of the women concerned.

Finally I complete the discussion in chapter nine with a brief overview of the findings and arguments contained in the body of my thesis.

In writing this thesis I have used a number of research methods, but interviews undertaken during part of 1984 and early 1985 as well as additional interviews carried out in February and March 1989 form the core of the information. A second and most useful resource has been a range of documentary evidence which includes trade union and works conference minutes and *The Loudspeaker*, the company house journal. Through careful selection and integration of this range of material I have been able to present some sense of the work experience for the women concerned. It must be acknowledged that such an approach is immediately circumscribed by the agenda I presented to the women concerned, my interests as a researcher, and by my interpretation of their story, issues which are discussed further in my methodological appendix. As I have already noted further discussion of the research methods is contained in an appendix. It should be noted there are absences of firm data on wages and on employee numbers over the period and this is explained in the appendix.

CHAPTER TWO

The Character Of The Coventry Labour Market.

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is primarily to outline the character of the local labour market, thus providing a background in which to contextualise the later growth of the QEC. There are a number of arguments I intend to develop. Firstly, I suggest that the development of the Coventry labour market from the beginning of this century until the early 1940s, characterised mainly by mechanical engineering industries, suggests a strong bias towards male employment. Secondly, that this labour market not only retained a highly male but also a manual character. Thirdly, that the expansion of the engineering sectors and the rise of the new industries meant that local skilled workers, displaced by the demise of the old industries, entered the skilled jobs in the new industries such as cycles, with migrant labour filling the semi-skilled jobs in the new industries. Fourthly, that although the new industries have been characterised as oriented towards the employment of female labour (Gluckman 1986), this has not occurred in a straight forward fashion in the Coventry labour market, for only two of the new industries namely Courtaulds and to a greater extent QEC followed this pattern, employing large numbers of women. Fifthly, my evidence also suggests that up until the emergence of these industries particularly in the post war period, the mechanical engineering industry provided only a very small niche of employment for women, often reflecting some aspect of their domestic role. Sixthly, I want to suggest that this pattern of a highly sexually entrenched labour market has roots in the particular historical character and subsequent development of the Coventry labour market. For instance, I suggest a link between the old craft industries, such as watch making and the cycle trade, and male employment in the new industries such as vehicle manufacture. On the other hand, I outline a link between the old silk industries, and female employment in the new industries such as Courtaulds. This pattern suggests consistency and as such some explanation for the sexually entrenched nature of the Coventry labour market. On the other hand it fails to explain why the QEC, with no links in the

traditional and local infrastructure should become a major employer of women.

Material for this chapter is largely drawn from secondary sources, particularly economic histories concerned generally with the growth of Coventry as an important industrial sector, and several more focused studies concerned with specific features of the Coventry labour market like labour relations, or migration. The set of concerns raised are often crucial to any understanding of Coventry's economic growth, but they do not deal with more particular issues such as the importance of women workers in the local economy, and the impact of the dynamics of gender on the character of the labour market. Information may be patchy in some areas, so what is presented is tentative and needs more thorough investigation than I am able to offer at this point.

This chapter will therefore attempt to convey some sense of the features and changes which characterized the development of the Coventry labour markets from the 19th century onwards. The key feature of the Coventry labour market was that despite successive changes in the patterns of employment it remained predominantly male and manual producing a narrow range of market products. Changes included a shift to the "new industries" at the turn of the 19th century, involving the activities of a range of new enterprises, and the expansion of semi-skilled work. Notwithstanding the development of this new industrial phenomenon the key characteristics and patterns of female employment were sustained, despite some very significant change. For instance, throughout this period, with the exception of the two world war periods women were confined to particular niches in specific industries. The exceptional experience for Coventry women was that during war times they went into what was traditionally defined as male employment, substituting for male workers in mechanical engineering. However, this proved to be only a temporary breakdown of the sexually segregated nature of the Coventry labour market, for women vacated these positions after the wars, and patterns of segregation were re-established particularly after 1945. What was new to female employment in the Coventry labour market in the immediate post war period was the expansion of work for women, and the expansion of a new pattern of female employment; that of part-time work. There was, therefore, both a qualitative and quantitative change, with a shift from full-time employment patterns to part-time employment and an increase in the number of women in the labour market. Change was also reflected in the fact that many of

these women were married, and as such represented a break with past traditions when there was a widespread ban on married women in the labour market.

The electrical engineering industry in the guise of the GEC became the critical site of the freshly defined gender segregated labour market, particularly in the post-war period. To understand this development it will be necessary to chart the development of the labour markets, which will demonstrate that this industry unlike the other new industries, had no clear links with the earlier history of development in the city. The GEC was to become the major employer of female labour consolidating an already deeply entrenched segregated labour market. As a result by the post war period Coventry's labour markets were constructed on the basis of male and female jobs, a point well borne out by Tolliday:

"The labour forces under consideration were all overwhelmingly white and male. The lines of segregation in the Coventry labour market were clearly defined and well known. In Federated vehicle-building firms less than four per cent of manual workers were women in 1967: Morris Engines employed only 44, (one per cent) Standard Motors 186, (2.3 per cent). The picture in aircraft was the same: the biggest firm, Bristol-Siddley, employed 91 women (1.8 per cent). The only place that placed women in motor firms was in the trim shops where most of the 385 (6.4 per cent) at Rootes and 403 (6.9 per cent) at Jaguar worked. Mechanical engineering followed a similar pattern: Herberts employed eight per cent women. Women's employment in engineering was almost wholly concentrated in electrical engineering: 56 per cent of GEC workers were women."¹

This segregation of the Coventry labour market was very entrenched, a point endorsed by the women interviewed, especially those women entering or seeking work in the post-war decade. In order to explain this pattern it will be necessary to look at the development of Coventry labour markets more fully.

¹ Tolliday, B. in *Life and Labour in A 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. and Mason, T. pp.206-7.

Historical Background: Coventry's Industrial Base.

The growth and development of Coventry's industrial base over the last century has experienced a dramatic change and restructuring. This was characterised by the decline of the 'old' craft based industries; the rise and decline in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries of some of the transitional industries; the birth and development of the 'new' industries in the first decades of the 20th century, and their consolidation in the inter- and post-war years. Throughout these changes, even when women did succeed in entering employment, they were placed in sexually segregated jobs, usually forms of unskilled and semi-skilled work.

I will seek to locate and explain this pattern of segregation by looking at two aspects of the pattern of wage work in Coventry. Firstly, I will chart the pattern of industrial development, with the rise and fall of specific products and sectors, and secondly I will look at the way in which the local labour market was expanded. My review of the rise and fall of sectors will underline the extent to which such discontinuities coexisted with the continual centrality of male manual work, with electrical engineering the major exception, whilst my review of the expansion of the labour market highlights the centrality of male in-migration and the secondary development of recruitment for full-time and later part-time women workers. I will focus first on the overall pattern of development in employment and the labour market, before, explicitly commenting on the implications of this pattern for the experience of women.

During the second half of the 19th century the 'old' craft based industries, which included silk and ribbon weaving and watchmaking, declined. The 'transitional' industries, which included the mechanised sector of watchmaking, chainmaking and the cycle trade emerged over the later decades of the 19th century and survived into the early years of the 20th century: indeed some like chainmaking continued much longer into the 1980s. The new industries of the 20th century included textiles, synthetic fibres, motors, aircraft and their component industries and electrical engineering.

Both the 'transitional' industries and the new industries owed much of their success and development to the machine tool industry which established itself in 1888 in Coventry. The

growth of the new industries in Coventry can also be linked to the 'old' industrial infrastructure which provided workshop space, skills and labour.

One of the most outstanding features characterising Coventry's industrial base from 1860s onwards was the narrowness of its range of products, which had implications for the sexual division of labour and the stability of the waged labour relationship. For instance from the 1860s until the turn of the century Coventry's economy was based on two industries: silk and watchmaking. Whilst there was a shift at the turn of the century there was still a reliance on two industries, now the more mechanized sector of watchmaking and the cycle industry. The cycle industry proved to be the transitional link to the growth of the motor industry throughout the 20th century, motors sharing the local economy with aircraft during the inter-war and immediate post-war reconstruction years. Thoms and Donnelly (1986) argue that the local economy by the 1960s was reduced to dependency on very specific features and products associated with the motor industry, and to a lesser degree electrical engineering.

The shifting focus on specific products was a result of both changes in technology and market opportunities. The decline in watchmaking was due in part to its refusal to adapt to the changing labour process whilst failing to respond to the opportunities of the mass market, though Rotherham's (watchmaking) survived well into the 1920s by embracing mechanized production processes. Nevertheless the demise of the 'old' watchmaking industry paralleled the rise of the cycle trade and the 'new' industries of motors, electrical engineering and synthetic silks. Most of the watchmakers simply closed business, while some like Alick Hills diversified into chainmaking. Against this background it was the cycle trade that heralded in a new form of labour process:

"It was essentially the cycle trade which brought the phenomenon of large scale mass production to Coventry's industrial landscape."²

However the success of the cycle industry was short lived, peaking in Coventry in 1890 with seventy different firms and gradually fading in the early decades of the 20th century due to

² Authors in *Life & Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. Mason, T. pp.16-17

market competition and the tendency of Coventry's entrepreneurs to venture into the nascent motor industry.

The growth of the motor industry in the early days benefited from the transferable skills associated with the cycle industry and the growing machine tool industry. The Daimler was the first motor manufacturer, beginning in 1896. By 1905 there were twenty-nine different car makers in Coventry. This number had decreased by 1913 as a result of an economic crisis but in 1914 was joined by the Standard. With the exception of Fords at Manchester, Coventry was the leading industrial centre for the production of motor cars.³

The machine tool industry was established in 1888, and whilst contributing to the growth of the motor trade, also grew because of the latter's expansion. Alfred Herbert was the leading manufacturer in this field followed by Webster and Bennett, and Coventry Gauge and Tool.

Wickman's, an offshoot of the motor trade, was partly representative of the component industries although Thoms and Donnelly argue that local firms depended largely on outside suppliers for components, pointing out that Coventry never developed a comprehensive component sector.

Another strand of the 'new' industries settled in Coventry at the beginning of the century when Courtaulds which produced synthetic silks opened its first plant in Foleshill, north Coventry, an area which accommodated the silk trade and as a result provided workshop space and labour.⁴

Finally Electrical Engineering, characterised as another of the 'new' industries was brought to Coventry by British Thompson Houston in 1912.⁵ BTH began by producing heavy equipment for electrical power stations and it was not until 1916 that GEC first came to Coventry and concentrated on the lighter side of electrical engineering by making telephone systems and wireless sets for the consumer market. (See the next chapter for a fuller discussion of the development of

³ Donnelly, T. and Thoms D. in *Life & Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. and Mason, T.

⁴ Castle, J. in *Life & Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. and Mason, T.

⁵ Carr, P. PhD thesis.

the GEC in Coventry.)

Throughout the earlier decades of the 20th employers tended to be small in size, and did not extend beyond a single workshop or plant, often employing not more than a hundred workers. However, according to Richardson (1972) this was a period of tremendous experimentation, change and innovation for male workers:

"It is impossible to exaggerate the immense self-confidence with which the young men working in Coventry approached the making of motor cars in the years before 1914. Some worked on their own account in backyard workshops, others in quality firms such as the Daimler, but it was difficult to persuade anyone that real motors were made anywhere else. They were an astonishing social cross-section, army and public school men mixing freely with former cycle workers, all united by a common enthusiasm. Young apprentices worked at Daimler, Siddley-Deasy or some other factory during the day and argued about cars all evening in the relatively few hotel lounges which this overcrowded city possessed." ⁶

According to this account the innovators of some of the early motor industry involved local apprentices, suggesting that the establishment of the motor industry was a result of the combined effort of local craft initiative and other enthusiasts, underlined by a predominantly male culture.

The 'new' industries were distinct in a number of important ways according to Gluckman (1986): they represented a shift from heavy capital goods to consumer products; from craft based labour processes to the assembly line, or conveyor belt and continuous flow production; employing semi-skilled workers. Gluckman also notes that this shift involved a relocation of capital from the old stable industries to the Midlands, while Lancaster explained that labour migrated to Coventry from the depressed areas. So by the turn of the century the 'new' industrial base was in its embryonic form in Coventry, though the First World War brought about a temporary diversification in the Coventry product market from consumer to war products. These were largely produced in the Ordnance Works which were under government contract.

⁶ Richardson, K. *Twentieth century Coventry*, p44.

The inter-war period witnessed a consolidation of the 'new' industries in Coventry. This included motors, aircraft, electrical engineering, synthetic fibres and machine tools. By 1929 there were forty car producers in the city making luxury cars, and although there was a trend towards change in the methods of production from short batch to the use of flow line standardized methods this remained partial and uneven.⁷ By 1939 six large companies dominated the local economy still in the business of luxury cars. The aircraft industry too grew in this period, stimulated by the government rearmament programme. The significance of local manufacturers in the build up to the war effort was symbolised in the Shadow Factory Scheme when Coventry's leading industrialists, including Alfred Herbert, the Rootes Brothers and Captain Black from the Standard collaborated with the government.

This signalled another diversification in market product with the construction of aircraft and aero engines. In 1937 four Shadow Factories were built producing 800 aircraft engines each week.⁸ Thus the local economy was deployed in the interests of the war effort, the GEC producing radar equipment, while Herberts made 68,000 machine tools between 1939-1944.

The post war local economy was redirected into the vehicle and electrical engineering industries, a heritage of the interwar era. This was despite some initial discussion about the course of its direction. For instance, Hinton (1982) suggests that these involved at the end of the war workplace politics in the form of the strong, communist dominated steward movement, which argued about an alternative socialist economic strategy for the city. This stemmed in part from fears that once the economy fell into private hands then the old problems of unstable fluctuating employment patterns would re-occur. However this trend was very short lived because very soon there was collaboration between the labour movement and the industrialists on a post war economic strategy which would boost the production of motor vehicles, in which the productivist doctrines of the left were incorporated with the expansionist policies of private capital as the route to post war reconstruction.

⁷ Tolliday, S. in *Life and Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. Mason, T.

⁸ Donnelly, T. and Thomas, D. in *Life & Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. and Mason, T.

During the immediate post war years the local economy was dominated by both aircraft and the motor industry. The Standard continued to produce aero engines, while the Banner Lane plant diversified into tractor production. However, the aircraft industry was largely lost in the 1960s due to a change in government policy and a failure of the local economy to successfully produce civilian aircraft with a subsequent loss of 11,000 jobs. Meanwhile the direction the motor industry took meant that Coventry became "a car assembly centre for volume produced cars",⁹ narrowing Coventry's economic base. This was not helped by the fact that with the exception of Dunlop, the components industry did not expand in Coventry. Neither did this narrowly based infrastructure give rise to a major service sector. Of the large employers only Alfred Herberts had their administrative head quarters in Coventry, thus failing to provide Coventry workers with wider opportunities in white collar work. Looking at the Coventry labour market over the last sixty years it is possible to see that the demise of the 'old' industries and the rise of the particular form of the 'new' industries meant that the economic infrastructure remained narrow, and still very largely dependent on manual skills. However, the transition to the 'new' industries meant an increasingly need for semi-skilled manual workers. In this section I have attempted to demonstrate that the particular development of the Coventry industrial base with its narrow focus on very specific facets of particular industries narrowly defined the parameters of the labour market, and that these parameters remained through the re-composition in the skill requirements of the manual workers. I will now turn to the development of the labour market as such.

In line with the shift in dominant products there has been considerable change in the labour market. Change has involved growth, a shift in the kind of skill required, a change in the composition of the labour force, restructuring of the jobs on offer, and also a growth of trade unionism. Of particular significance for my study has been the growing importance of part-time work in this period as a consequence of the growth of the labour market and the need to attract labour. The growth of the labour market first began around the turn of the century with the expansion of the

⁹ Donnelly, T. and Thoms, D. in *Life & Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. Mason, T.

industrial base, and since then it has been accommodated by two waves of migration, one in the inter-war period: for instance between 1931 and 1939 the local population had grown from 167,083 to 224, 262 as a result partly from the entry of 42,148 migrants into the local labour market.¹⁰ and one in the post war period; corresponding with the expansion of part-time work and the employment of married women. This pattern of employment can be partly explained in the character of migration. Migrants until the post-war period came from the depressed areas in the UK and from Elze. The typical migrant before the Second World War was white, male, young and single (with the exception of the First World War period when female migrant women entered the munitions industry on a temporary basis.) Indeed male migrants still predominated in 1951 and 1961 (by the later date the twenty-four to twenty-five age group included 21,000 males representing an increase for 1951, well above the national average of 3%). This suggests that the young white male migrant featured very strongly in the local labour market. It remains unclear how far this migration was accompanied by family formation of the sort which was to make available a pool of female workers for the electrical engineering industry during the post-war period, but it remains likely that this was so.

There has been very little work done on the location of migrant workers in the local labour market, with the exception of Grainger (1986) and Lancaster (1986). However, whilst Lancaster refers to the early decades of this century he suggests that the migrant workers filled the semi-skilled posts in the new industries while local skilled men kept their trade; for instance at the turn of the century the skilled watchmakers entered the skilled sections of the cycle trade. Subsequent studies of the local labour market, with the exception of Grainger (1986) have generally ignored the importance of ethnicity and race as aspects of the experience of migration and as determinants of labour market hierarchisation, though Grainger's (1986) study of Herberts suggests that, as elsewhere, Asian migrants were relegated to the lowest paid and worst jobs. This is an important question, and one that needs further investigation; not least for the influence that the male migrant wage may have had upon the choices made by female workers, concerning the hours and the rates

¹⁰ Lancaster, B. in *Life and Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. and Mason, T. p.67

of pay they were prepared to accept.

To complete my sketch of the pattern of employment in Coventry it is necessary to say something about union organization, for in important respects this conditioned the day to day experience of work, and indeed extended into partial regulation of the male semi-skilled market through union based recruitment. As I have shown, Coventry has a long established industrial base which has been characterised by considerable change in the organisation of work, in products and in the labour market. Trade union organisation too has shown considerable unevenness characterised by patchy organisation during different historical periods and for particular employers and industries. Such unevenness has been demonstrated in the shift from a weak and depleted labour movement in the 1920s to the evolution of a system of strong collective bargaining particularly in the post war era. The 1920s and 1930s had witnessed the defeat of the engineering workers epitomised by the 1922 lockout. Unemployment caused by the depression in the 1920s and 1930s further eroded the strength of the unions through a reduction in membership. Throughout the inter-war period union weakness was reflected in fluctuating patterns of employment for workers, low pay, and arbitrary management.

The war years appear to be the watershed for union fortunes although the periodisation and explanation of their subsequent growth is much contested. Two issues are disputed, the timing of the unions revival and the impact of migration on such revival. For instance, Zeidin (1980) attributed the growth of unionism to the influx of migrant skilled workers, but this argument is disputed by (Lyddon 1983) who points out that the inter-war period which was characterized by migration did not necessarily equate with union density and strength. Indeed Lyddon argues that the unions were not strong until the 1950s. This argument is consistent with Tolliday (1986) who suggests that it was not until the 1940's that the trade unions gained a substantial hold in the Coventry factories. The war in particular was to see the revival of active workplace politics. Nevertheless it is important not to overstate what was involved, for it would appear that strong systems of collective bargaining were characteristic of only some industries, and then perhaps more associated with particular vehicle manufacturers.

From the 1940s onwards local management-union relationships were characterized by elements of corporatism. This implied participation on the part of the unions but again it is important not to gloss over what this meant. It would seem that in the interests of productivity and profits some managements conceded or delegated aspects of the organization of PBR systems and job allocation for a time to workplace trade unions in the form of stewards and convenors. This would appear to have been an attractive option for some employers. However, Tolliday (1986) documents the varied management response to the emerging unions in the 1940s, and shows that many of the local employers posed a serious challenge to the growth and strength of the unions. The aircraft employers and Rootes as well as Herberts challenged the unions and the right of JSSC's to operate, and while the unions at Rootes sustained their effectiveness they failed to do this at Herberts. Tolliday's explanation of this emphasizes Herbert's paternalism as well as the large number of women workers employed on a temporary basis during the war. He also shows that throughout the 1950s the unions remained weak at Herberts, threatened in the 1960s with a further decline when the metal industries and male employment began to slide, underlying the unevenness of workplace union organization in Coventry. Despite these examples the 1950s showed important continuities with the strong union representation established in the aircraft and the motor industry during the war.

Payments by results characterised the payment system of most employers for the whole of the inter-war and post-war period up until the 1960s, when MDW was introduced in some factories; PBR systems of payments involved a series of different payments: usually there was a basic rate, and a bonus, and in some cases like Herberts and the GEC a merit bonus. The rate of pay according to PBR varied greatly from individual worker to worker and between sections and factories, and fluctuated according to effort and very significantly according to the strength of trade union organisation. While Coventry has become famous for its gang based bonus systems (eg at the Standard), such gang systems were much romanticised by both Melman (1958) and Wright (1961): Tolliday shows that they could be intensely competitive among the workers while being selective in who joined the gang thus giving rise to wage differentiation and fragmentation, rather than any wider worker solidarity.

My characterisation of the Coventry labour market has so far taken account of the evolution of Coventry's product market and identified migration as a response to economic growth, whilst offering a rudimentary glimpse of both labour relations and payment systems. I will now turn to a more specific examination of women's position in this structure.

Women and the Coventry Labour Market

Where did women fit into this picture? It would appear that nationally domestic service was still the main source of female employment until the outbreak of the First World War when women entered the munitions industries. Drawing on some of the discussions with my respondents it would appear that many Coventry women found employment in this sector too. During this period also another important employer of women in the Coventry labour market was the "old" silk and ribbon industry. For instance, the silk and ribbon industry in 1891 employed 2,505 female workers as compared with 753 male workers. The mechanised sector of watchmaking also employed female labour. Therefore at the end of the century the main employer of women in the industrial sector of the Coventry labour market was the old silk industry and the mechanized sector of watchmaking.

Industrial development in Coventry during this period paralleled industrial development in the Midlands with the birth of the "new industries" which Gluckman (1986) has emphasized brought in the new factory system characterised by a system of standardised production, and the dominance of semi-skilled work which increasingly drew on female labour. However, of the "new industries" settling in Coventry only electrical engineering and to a lesser degree Courtaulds (who had links with the "old" silk industry) became significant employers of female labour, with the GEC sharing increasingly in this direction through the 1920s and into the post war period. Although the beginning of this century saw a shift in mechanical engineering from the production of heavy goods to other "new industries" like motor, aircraft manufacture and their components industries, they were not to become important employers of female labour in the Coventry labour market. For instance in 1901 the cycle trade, the forerunner to the motor industry, employed 560 women as opposed to 5,551 male workers. This pattern continued so that by the 1910s, the cycle and the motor industry together employed only a fraction of women in their workforce:

"Cycle and motor manufacture, excluding dealers had 5372 men, and only 602 women."¹¹

¹¹ Richardson, E. *Twentieth-century Coventry*, p44

This shows that the major sectors among the 'new industries' offered little work for women and suggests that only a few of the new employers became major recruiters of female labour. It would appear that many of the 'new industries' retained links with past traditions in their selection of workers, in that the mechanical engineering sector in the new guise of the vehicle industry continued an established pattern of male employment. This suggests that the pattern of male segregation in this sector can be partly explained by its historical development. For instance, male skilled engineering workers dominated the cycle trade, and some of these became the first engineers in the evolution of the vehicle industry. Moreover the mechanical engineering industries locally were male dominated at the turn of the century. For instance, Lancaster (1986) has shown that in 1896 taking mechanical engineering employers as a whole, out of a total workforce of 10,000 workers only 20% were women. Both the motor and the aircraft industry were to become major employers of male labour with women workers in sexually segregated jobs which reflected some aspect of their domestic role. In particular they became machinists in trim shops working on the seat covering of vehicles. Thus the motor industry became a gender specific employer in that most of their manual workers were male.

A parallel pattern of continuities can be observed when looking at Courtaulds, another example of a 'new industry', but in this case of female employment. This continuity is suggested by the link between Courtaulds and the 'old' silk industry. Courtaulds established itself in the location of the 'old' silk industry and relied heavily on female labour with 75% of its work force female.¹² Both of these cases are examples of continuities in sectoral sexual segregation. However, I do not wish to argue that these continuities were absolute. Firstly my evidence on historical continuities has to recognize the significant disruptions which I have already noted as characteristic of both world wars. Consideration of these periods suggests that the continuities I have been explaining were actively reconstituted, rather than passively reproduced, by the activities of both employers and especially male workers at key moments in the Coventry labour market.

¹² Castle, J. in *Life and Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B and Mason, T.

As elsewhere the labour market was disturbed temporarily during the First World War when women were employed under the conditions of the Temporary Employment of Women's Agreement in the production of munitions. Women temporarily carried out 'male' jobs and were paid a portion of the male rate for the job, but there were considerable disputes between workers and employers regarding the temporary employment of women, for the employers saw this as an opportunity to extend the dilution of male skilled labour. Although jobs were reserved for male workers, the entry of women into work signalled that the proportion of skilled compared with semi-skilled jobs had decreased. Against this background the agreement rested on the reservation of jobs for male workers after the war.

The pre-war patterns of sectoral sexual segregation were to be re-established during the inter-war period. Nevertheless according to my interview material the profusion of motor employers and weak unionization allowed some of the women I interviewed to find jobs in the motor industry during the inter-war period. Some of the earlier women were employed in Rotherhams, the watchmakers in the 1920's. While women filled the semi skilled jobs in the machine shop sections in watchmaking, the jobs they did when they moved into the motor industry often reflected women's 'domestic role', for the women concerned report being employed in semi-skilled work as sewing machinists, a few were polishers, while here and elsewhere (with the exception of the GEC) married women were denied opportunities in waged work.

However during the inter-war period Courtaulds and GEC were the two most important employers of women; in 1939 GEC employed 3,450 women and Courtaulds 2,700.¹³ The other major discontinuity was of a somewhat different sort, because it involved the establishment of a new firm and industry which was exceptional in having no obvious precursor. However, a third employer of women in the inter-war period was BTH the electrical engineering company where, as I have already noted there was no obvious sectoral precursors. This meant that female employment was largely segregated in two industries: electrical engineering and synthetic silk, and to a lesser degree in watchmaking in the earlier part of the interwar decades.

¹³ *Cassidy, J. in Life & Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. Mason, T.

The outbreak of the Second World War again temporarily widened the scope of women's employment. For a second time in the 20th century women entered the mechanical engineering industry: locally this meant work in the Shadow Factories which had begun manufacturing aircraft and commodities for the war effort, while Alfred Herbert the machine tool producer also employed large numbers of women. Women were employed on 'male' jobs because of a labour shortage, a situation which potentially advanced another aspect of the employers' interest, namely to establish cheaper wages. It was on this issue that the trade unions contested the employment of women.

The underlying rationale of the Extended Employment of Women's Agreement was that it guaranteed male jobs and essentially defined women as temporary workers, while guaranteeing women male rates of pay so long as it could be supported that they were doing the same job as the male who had vacated it. An examination of the Employer Works Conference Minutes shows that initially women replaced youth and juvenile labour and were thus denied the male rate for the job. Even in situations where women replaced skilled male workers or were on jobs usually carried out by male workers the employers used other arguments, for instance that the definition of women's work varied according to district and tradition, to avoid payment of the male rate for the job. In one instance Rootes Securities (an anti-union employer according to Tolliday 1986) opened a new plant in order to do this, and having recruited female workers, argued that the work they did could only be 'women's work'.¹⁴ There are other instances documented where employers actually laid off male workers without redeploying them. In these conditions women's entry into 'male' work was contested.

Whilst employers made vociferous efforts to recruit women, (and the CP was increasingly energetic in encouraging their recruitment, see Hinton 1980): Croucher (1982) suggests that women were not over keen to enter employment, making voluntary recruitment unsuccessful and pushing ahead conscription. Women also resisted the workplace discipline according to Summerfield (1977), though she suggests that such resistance was offered mainly by single

¹⁴ See Works Conference Minutes 1940-65.

women as opposed to married women, citing the latter's greater mobility as the underlying explanation for this difference in response.¹⁵

At local level the EEF debated the issue of pay as an incentive to female workers. Some saw the low rate on offer as a disincentive and circumvented this by paying 400% bonus payments. For instance women at Rootes Securities were earning up to £5.0s 0d per week when factories like the GEC paid a little over £2.0s 0d. However the high wages earned were often a result of overtime. While women had an opportunity of working 'male' jobs they were denied equal rates of pay, and indeed companies like the GEC exhibited considerable labour shortage and labour turnover.¹⁶

One of the effects of the presence of large numbers of female workers in male jobs was that according to Croucher (1982) it brought about a change in both trade union attitude and strategy to female workers. During the war the skilled unions opened their doors for the first time to women workers. Evidence of this development can be observed at local level when the AEUW began to compete with the TGWU for female membership.¹⁷ Thus in conjunction with the consolidation of the unions in the workplace women were successfully recruited, Croucher (1982) suggests on the basis of national trends that female membership in many shops was 100% and by the end of 1944 the combined female membership of the AEUW and the TGWU had well over 900,000, while he notes that in the Coventry district 30 women stewards were involved in negotiation and by June 1943 had made 11 appearances at Works Conferences.

Despite this women stewards had very little influence on the local JSSC's or on union policy agendas. The little impact they had was more on health and safety issues. Women in membership failed to persuade unions to take on board the issues specific to women like the problems associated with work and home, when women worked very long hours, found childminding difficult and shopping equally problematic.¹⁸ Nakamura (1984) found that married women were

¹⁵ It is worth noting that although Summerfield's comment refers to women in the context of a wider labour market, it may also draw on the Coventry experience, for she partly relied on the information provided by Miss Observation which included a focus on the Coventry labour market.

¹⁶ EEF Minutes 1940-65.

¹⁷ AEUW Minutes covering the period 1940s and 1950s.

reluctant to continue at work after the war, and this decision on the part of the women may well have been influenced by the difficulties experienced in combining home and work responsibilities during the war. Several features contributed to such difficulties; most important were the lack of adequate child care facilities, the inadequacy of a wage capable of sustaining the cost of child-minding, and the demands made on the women concerned. This set of circumstances made working on a full-time basis very difficult. There were very few part-time jobs available during the war which might suggest why women with considerable responsibilities might be reluctant to work. Another important factor was the foregone conclusion that women would vacate their war-time posts once hostilities ended. This had been the basic tenet of the Extended Employment of Women's Agreement which ensured the reservation of jobs for male workers in sectors of the post-war economy that had hitherto been male dominated. Therefore those opportunities as production workers which existed for women during the war were not generally continued afterwards.

Post-war the deepening sexual segregation of the labour market was characteristic of pre-war patterns of employment. Such a pattern of development can be partly explained by four distinct features in the evolution of sectoral employment and represented distinctive discontinuity and a break with past traditions; the growth of female employment, the growth electrical engineering in the guise of the GEC, the development of this sector as a major recruiter of women workers, and the growth of part-time employment. Far from emulating the vehicle manufacturing sector where established patterns of recruitment featured the dominance of full-time and male employment: in contrast the GEC adopted patterns of recruitment, predominantly featuring women workers, and while offering full-time jobs also made work available on a part-time basis. While in the previous decades with the exception of the disruption caused by the war, the engineering industries maintained a predominantly male labour force, the GEC in the 1950s and 1960s established a predominantly female labour market.

¹² Summerfield, P. "Women Workers in the Second World War".

As I have previously mentioned it is likely that the two waves of migration lead to the formation of families providing labour for local employers in the post-war period. Even then evidence suggests that employers incorporated very strong gender preferences in their recruitment strategies, a point illustrated in the following comment:

"However in Coventry women form a smaller proportion of the engineering workforce than they do nationally. In 1976, there were 5,269 women employed full-time and 343 part-time in the car industry; women comprised 10% of the total workforce, and 7% of these worked part-time. And 2961 women worked full-time and 411 worked part-time in mechanical engineering."¹⁹

This then suggests that jobs in the traditional engineering sector were filled by male workers on a full-time basis. Yet this does not explain why there were few women workers, because the absence of women cannot simply be equated with the absence of part-time work. Drawing on the discussions with my respondents, it seems that such jobs were not open to women, and that the jobs that were available to women were in the electrical engineering industry. The GEC had been expanding throughout the war period, a trend that was to continue during the following decades until the 1970s. The adoption of a labour intensive labour process continuously created a need for labour, which the company sought to secure through the recruitment of female workers. In the context of a labour shortage the demand for labour often seemed to exceed the supply; such competitiveness would have appeared to have led to the company's adoption of more innovative recruitment strategies, such as offering work on a part-time basis. It would also seem that the increased availability of part-time work at GEC increased the supply of female labour for as Beechey and Perkins (1987) in their excellent study suggest that employers saw part-time work as a recruitment strategy in a period of labour shortage, and women with domestic responsibilities largely responded. While this is undoubtedly a valid point it does not explain why a priori the GEC recruited female labour in preference to male workers. Explanations for the GEC's choice of a predominantly female labour force still remains an open question, although in the following

¹⁹ Beechey, V. and Perkins, T., *A Matter of Hours*, p.68

chapters discussions with managers offer some insights behind the company's preference for female labour. In the next chapter I will be looking at the development of the GEC in more detail.

CHAPTER THREE

The Development of the GEC in Coventry: an Outline.

Women's Employment at GEC

As I have already indicated early in this century the GEC joined the growing number of new industries in Coventry. The Peel Connor Telephone Works shifted to Coventry from Manchester in the early 1920's. It first acquired a small workshop in Stoke and this was the start of the fledgling company, making it the second electrical engineering employer in the area. In this chapter I intend to provide an outline of the significance of women's employment at the GEC, and its relationship to developments in the product market, labour process, job structure and payment systems characteristic of the GEC factories.

Several features of the local labour market initially attracted the company to Coventry. These included the availability of female labour and a range of skills.¹ Much later the company claimed that:

"Coventry had been deliberately chosen to become the centre of telephone manufacture because the fine work involved was the kind to which the workers in the city had long been established."²

Coventry had a reputation as an artisan city and skills were available but according to the following excerpt the company had rather more precise labour requirements than this would imply:

"Well in the 1920s when it was Peel Connor Works they had as many girls as they could get, and these then composed about four fifth of the labour force. Getting women was an economic exercise, women were cheaper and Coventry was oriented towards female employment. Places like BTH and Rotherhams had many women operatives. But GEC was keen to have as many women as possible, it was almost purely economic; they were

¹ Castle, J. in *Life and Labour in a 20th Century City*, eds. Lancaster, B. and Masco, T. pp.140.

² *The Loudspeaker* 1968/9 Vol 12/13 p.130

cheaper and cost less."³

This comment makes a number of important points. It considers that about 80% of the earlier company's workforce were women, and that the company was actively selecting and recruiting women, since it was assumed they were available and were cheaper in the Coventry labour market. It also suggests that the company regarded both the BTH, which produced heavy electrical goods, and Rotherhams, a mechanised sector of watchmaking, as possible sources of labour.

The company's heavy dependence on female labour remained characteristic of the GEC's employment patterns in the 1930s. Referring to this period a former Works Manager recollected that:

"In the 1930s something like around 80% of our manual workers were women."⁴

A later Personnel Manager elaborated on the long established pattern of female employment and the work experience involved:

"Women have always been an ideal labour force for us. It was a tradition that went back to the 1920s. In the very early days the company's workforce comprised of nearly all women. Even in the early days they worked the big presses and it was traditional once...we followed that. Of course in the electrical engineering sections, especially in assembly, and all the hand work where the work became fundamentally repetitive and it was always light, we found was especially suited to women. Young women with good eyesight and very nimble fingers are very capable of doing the work."⁵

This comment is a strong endorsement of the company's preference for women. Women were assumed to possess particular competences suited to the company's labour requirements. Another retired personnel manager elaborated on the stereotypes involved:

"Well it was found that girls particularly could easily do dexterous work. They had smaller hands and were more nimble fingered. And if you were a girl living in Coventry in the

³ Interview with Retired Works Manager (b.1923) (Worked at GEC 1927-77)

⁴ Interview with Retired Works Manager (b.1913) (Worked at GEC 1927-77)

⁵ Interview with Personnel Manager (b. unknown) (Worked at GEC 1967-present)

1930s and fancied working in a factory you went to the GBC. I had two spinster aunts there who were astounded that I went there to do my apprenticeship. You see it was almost inevitable that as a girl you took a job at GBC.⁶

According to this account the company had by the 1930s established itself as an employer of women. From the data available it may be concluded that the company's preference for women was linked to the availability of female labour, assumptions about women's competences, and the lower cost of female labour. In this sense the company appeared to assume that the work offered was suited to women since they were assumed to possess the manual skills required.

The evidence from these managers also suggested that low pay played a key role in the company's predilection to employ women. The claim that Coventry provided not only cheap labour but particularly that women in the engineering industry were badly paid has resonance in other sources, which suggests that wages for women were low in the industry in Coventry during the 1930s. For instance, in a conference held in May, 1937, between the Coventry and District Engineering Employers Association and the TGWU, the union explained:

"Women were concerned with the rate of 4d per hour for women in engineering. The union claim that both women laundry workers and women cleaners got more money. The union claim that engineering was a sweated trade as far as women were concerned."

The district base rate then for women in the engineering industry for a 47 hour week was £1.3s.8d. The minute continued:

"We contend there must be some skill in the work the women are doing, otherwise it would not be necessary for skilled men to be placed on the jobs. These girls are doing work which is at least semi-skilled and are on a basic of less than 50% of that of a man who sweeps the floor."⁷

⁶ Interview with Retired Personnel Manager (b.1923) (GBC 1937/1964)

⁷ TGWU Minutes Works Conference 25, August, 1937, TBN2, 208B

This example provides some sense that the relative level of wages for women in the local job market was considered low at a time when the demand for female labour was rising. Four years later it was pointed out to the engineering employers that:

"The Ministry of Transport attempted to recruit women workers from the aircraft and munitions to work as bus conductors, starting pay was 69s.6d for a 48 hour week guaranteed. This would rise to 76s. after 6 months training. Transport required a relatively small number of women, but the Ministry of Labour pointed out the difficulty if firms are paying anything less than £3.10s. for a 48 hour week."⁸

This then suggests that not all members of the Association were able to compete with the Ministry of Transport for women workers. In a survey on rates of pay for women in local engineering firms in November, 1941, it was found that:

"Women's rates ranged from £2. 18s. 10d to £4. 4s. 6d. for a 47 hour week for women aged twenty-one and over."⁹

This shows that although wages for women had improved in the engineering industry, there were still considerable differentials between employers. The GEC during this period found it difficult to obtain sufficient female workers for it seems that it was one of the local employers who continued to offer low pay.

Drawing on a variety of different sources of information I will now attempt to convey some sense of the continuing importance of women to the company. The large proportion of female manual labour can be explained by the nature of the work organisation and the sexual division of labour. The work was labour intensive and women did most of the production tasks on the shop floor with the exception of skilled work such as on maintenance, and in the toolroom, and labouring. During a visit to the personnel office I was able to view a set of photographs depicting the earliest organisation of work at the Stoke plant and observed that women appeared in most of the shops with the exception of the toolroom, although they seemed to be confined to segregated

⁸ Coventry and District Employers Association Minutes Vol. 1

⁹ Ibid

sections in some of the shops. The comments of the managers quoted above suggest that once established this pattern exhibited substantial continuity. Nevertheless the post war expansion of the company witnessed an increase in the total number of workers and an increase in the number of women workers. Beechey and Perkins provide an outline of employment trends in electricals (which more or less equates with the QEC) in Coventry:

"With the exception of brief periods of decline total employment in the industry rose steadily from 1948-1970. The male employment rate broadly followed the total employment rate, with a progressive trend upwards, but declines in the level of employment were less sharp for men than for the total workforce. The female employment rate also followed the total rate but periods of cyclical unemployment were felt more severely by women and when total employment peaked (1963 and 1970), rises in female employment were particularly sharp."¹⁰

This shows that female labour continued to play a crucial role in the production process but also highlights the distinctive ways in which women experienced the fluctuations of employment during the post-war boom.

According to Chesterman, developments during the post war period meant that by 1971:

"The Company had six factories in Coventry employing a workforce of 9,727 of whom 3,800 were women."¹¹

This showed that the total number of workers increased dramatically over the five decades of the company's existence, but that women as a proportion of the total number had declined compared with earlier 1920s estimate, when 80% of the shop floor were said to be women. It should be noted that these figures do not indicate what proportion of women were hourly paid manual workers, or represented other categories of workers. However in a recent interview a member of personnel management suggested that:

¹⁰ Beechey, V. and Perkins, T. *A Matter of Hours* p.30

¹¹ Chesterman, C. *Women's Part-time Employment*

"Currently 40% to 60% of our manual workers are women. The total manual workforce is about 2,300 and the total workforce is 7,000 in Coventry, so I suppose a little over half of that 2,300 manual workers are women."¹²

This figure refers to the total number of female manual workers employed by the company in Coventry at the end of the 1980s. When compared to previous figures it suggests that the number of workers overall has decreased since the early 1970s, and indeed management estimates indicate a loss of over 9,000 jobs, from a figure of 16,000 for the early 1960s.

However, despite the decrease in the overall number of workers, and the other more qualitative changes, the percentage of female manual workers currently employed by the company continues to be substantial. As such it corresponds with the employment patterns generally in the electrical engineering sector, for according to Pearson:

"Hood and Young report that 51% of all workers employed by foreign firms in the electrical engineering sector in the United Kingdom are women."¹³

Thus despite the changes in the labour process and the reduction in the number of manual jobs for women, they still play a crucial role in direct production processes in electrical engineering.

The evolution of the company both nationally and locally, was characterized by growth and expansion through the purchase of sites, takeovers and mergers.¹⁴ This growth began in 1921

¹² Interview with Current Personnel Manager (b. unknown) (Worked at GEC 1967-present)

¹³ Pearson, R. in *The Changing Experience of Employment*, Ed. K. Purcell p.84

¹⁴ As background it should be noted that the growth of GEC was not, however, an entirely smooth progression. From the 1930s British electrical engineering had participated in an international cartel and had also benefited from close relations with the state as a key purchaser of some of their products. Nevertheless, the development of competition in consumer durables and the erosion of comfortable spheres of influence with greater international competition precipitated something of a financial crisis for the company as loans were recalled while profit was falling. The appointment of Weinstock in 1962 was a response to these developments, and this meant a change in management approach. Weinstock challenged such features as management teams dominated by engineers, (with a bias towards production techniques and quality), their preference for heavy electrical plant for power stations; and limited attention to costing, marketing, sales and financial control. The newer managerial functions like costing and marketing were enthusiastically embraced under the rubric of efficiency by Weinstock: in particular Marriott and Jones explain that although Weinstock was a remote figure he held fairly tight reins over the company and through the last three decades this has meant persistent head office pressure on financial targets, profitability and productivity, and a willingness to close plants and displace labour.

when the company acquired 140 acres of land at Copswood Stoke accommodating 2,000 workers in a single plant. By 1936 the company had established itself in other areas within the city, buying sites from Triumph, Lea Francis (a declining motor manufacturer) and from a Stamping Company. However it was during the immediate post war decades that most growth occurred. Marriot and Jones report that between 1947 and 1955 the company spent £20 million nationally on plant and buildings. In Coventry the Company acquired the Spon Street plant, a five storey high building, from the Rudge Company in the late 1940's. Over the next decade plants were obtained and established at Ford Street, Hood Street and Queen Victoria Road, while in 1962 the main works at Stoke transferred one of its sections to a new site at Brandon Road. Of this later move the Loudspeaker explained:

"This self contained unit has its own stores, production control, cable forming, coil winding, assembly and wiring sections. Most of the people we saw there had moved with a section from the Telephone Works. Other workers will travel from Binley."¹³

As in other cases this move not only represented a transfer of a section, as it was reported that 400 extra workers were to be recruited. Furthermore the fact that some shifts would be part-time underlined that women workers were the target.

By the early 1960s the company had about eight sites in Coventry spread throughout the city, three in the city centre with the remainder situated close to working class areas in the outlying suburbs.

During the immediate post war period the company had a preference for heavy plant products but the Coventry sites had a long tradition in the lighter side of electrical engineering. Products manufactured locally included different varieties of telecommunications systems, some domestic consumer products, radar for the Ministry of Defence during the war, and later products for the nuclear industry.

¹³ *The Loudspeaker* Autumn, 1962 Vol. 16 p.193

The Peel Connor Telephone Works from its establishment in the 1920's was able to undertake the complete manufacture of the following products; automatic and manual exchange equipment, wireless sets, loudspeakers and wireless accessories.¹⁴ The main site at Stoke developed this into the Strouther Telecommunications System and also produced wireless sets. During the war years the telephone grew in importance, but the war effort also allowed the company to diversify slightly in its range of products, or it benefited from lucrative government contracts for the production of radar equipment.

In the immediate post war years the development of the electricity industry accompanied by its nationalisation in 1947, as well as the electrification of domestic properties created a growing demand for domestic consumer goods. While the Company had an established history locally in the manufacture of wirelesses, it also began to produce television sets, a product characterized by a seasonal pattern of demand. Televisions were produced at the Spon Street Plant and received a great deal of publicity locally, emphasising the use of standardized mass production techniques. In 1954 the company began to manufacture products for the nuclear industry. In many ways however there was very little diversification of products over the period under review because the main product, the Strouther System continued to be produced until the 1970s when it was replaced by System X.

During the post war decades the company enjoyed a safe domestic market for its telecommunication systems, supplying the Post Office with the Strouther system. Markets were also secured overseas in Commonwealth countries, as the company benefited from Britain's colonial heritage and more importantly from the company's involvement in an international cartel where markets were carved up between participants which discouraged competition from potential entrants.

Telecommunications technology through until the late 1960s was based on electro-mechanical engineering. The Strouther system was of this type and retained this characteristic

¹⁴ The Loudspeaker, Vol 1/1924/26 Local Studies Section, Central Library, Coventry

throughout its modifications. One implication of this was that there were only marginal change in work processes, for as the works manager explained:

"The Cross Bar was the first electric, but it wasn't new, it was of course new to the GEC. It was a Swedish Erikson Design and we only got it in the late 1960's. So you see we had gone a whole thirty years or more with the same technology. Well let me give you an example. We made a relay or a coil with a wire around it, and when a current was passed through it, it magnetised and drew an armature towards it, and contact was made. Now this piece of electro mechanical equipment while it did not remain as it was, it was continuously being made better, but the changes were modifications. All it meant was a modification in design which was transmitted to a blue print. Our current labour could then be retrained to deal with that."¹⁷

This point was confirmed by another long serving manager:

"Electro mechanical in all its varieties stayed put in its basic needs for skills, and you only changed the drawings so it was mere modification."¹⁸

These comments suggests that there were few major changes in the production process associated with the Strouther System, the company's main product. According to Kelly (1985) such consistency and narrow range of product often leads to standardized mass production techniques, though in the case of the GEC the following factors constrained this development. Firstly some of the subcomponents for the products were difficult to operationalise in this fashion, and there was a preference for a labour intensive process with little capital outlay. Thus while Taylorist and Fordist principles were incorporated into the labour process, Taylorism took precedence. One aspect of Fordism, flow line assembly was developed but seemed to take a rather primitive form: it often only involved a manual line and later a type of mechanised belt, retaining labour intensity and the use of simple hand tools and processes. Thus throughout the period I discuss work was organized in assembly in one of two ways, which depended on the

¹⁷ Interview with Retired Works Manager (b.1913) (GEC 1927-77)

¹⁸ Interview with Retired Personnel Manager (b.1923) (GEC 1937-84)

stage of assembly and the product: flow line assembly and multi-task single bench type work. In later chapters I will examine some of the subtle changes and variations which occurred within the context of this broadly stable pattern.

Job and Pay Structure.

Against the background of the type of production process outlined above, the dominant job pattern was characterised by a significant hierarchy for male workers, whereby men occupied most jobs on the shopfloor, with almost no hierarchy for women workers. Women were concentrated in assembly sections and some women operated the more manual machines in the mechanical sections. Women however carried out a range of subordinate tasks within these sections. Whilst such a job pattern was characterised by considerable rigidity, there were some exceptions -when some women reported that they operated the more mechanical machines in the mechanical sections during particular historical periods, and some of the management informants reported that some men were employed in the assembly sections on some jobs. This pattern of job differentiation was said to be based on technical competence, experience, responsibility and strength, though I will later be concerned with the problematical character of some of these assumptions.

The limited job hierarchy among the women operatives was characterised by several other distinctions; between full and part-time workers; between women operatives and these with job titles like 'floaters', 'fault girls' and 'utility girls' and between work on 'assembly' and work in the mechanical sections such as the machine shop. Allocation to different positions in this job structure was ostensibly based on experience, technical competence and dexterity, but it will become evident later in the thesis that in reality it was also linked to assertiveness and forms of tacit organization among the women concerned.

The job structure was characterised by relations of domination and subordination underlined not least by class but also gender relations. As I have previously noted male workers were found in jobs mainly associated with management and operation, in jobs that were perceived to be technically skillful and in heavy work such as labouring. Women on the other hand were notably absent from most positions associated with management and in labouring jobs, and were highly visible in others -where dexterity was highlighted. Women were not recruited as labourers, nor in posts above that of 'key girl' a post which formed part of first line supervision.

Women were not encouraged to compete for promotion, and were unlikely to be appointed to jobs as industrial engineers, draughtsmen, foremen, superintendents or works managers. All these features are graphically portrayed in the comment of a GEC supervisor:

"There was a very simple hierarchy and men formed a graduated pinnacle at the top with a pile of women at the bottom. Well the significant peak for a woman worker was being a key girl and even that was limited both in its job content and mobility. A woman could only supervise women, never ever male workers. Certainly that was a concept that was not even contemplated. Male workers were encouraged to compete for promotion. Women were not. There was nowhere for them to go. Promotion for women died at the key girl. I mean I moved up the ladder three or four times."¹⁹

Since this supervisor worked at the GEC in the 1960s and 1970s this implies considerable continuity and rigidity in such features of the job structure. In later chapters I will explain further the implications of such a pattern for the experience of women workers at the varied factories in Coventry.

From 1940s to the introduction of the Equal Pay Act in the early 1970s the system of payment at GEC was based on Payment by Results, with the exception of flat rates for women on inspection and Key Girls. All direct workers were paid according to incentive schemes, which consisted of a flat rate, and a major bonus and merit bonus. The base rate for all women workers was less than the unskilled base rate for male labourers, and the bonus system often yielded wages below these paid elsewhere.

Evidence for this pattern of low pay at the beginning of this period is found in a claim made by the union on behalf of two hundred and fifty semi-skilled female workers employed on coilwinding, soldering, wiring, paint spraying and lat finishing - several of these jobs being major categories of women's work in the factory. Advancing this claim Mr. Jones for the TGWU claimed that:

¹⁹ Interview with Supervisor (b.1942) (GEC 1963-1977)

"The average earnings over base rate are just over 80% of the Women's National Schedule rates, which means that some women earned lower figures than that. Some women earn as low as 50% of the base rate....We claim that wages paid to these women pieceworkers do compare unfavourably with those paid to the majority of women on day work in most places in the city. There is a disparity too between this department and other departments in the company itself."

This minute conveys some sense of the pay differential between the GEC and other local engineering employers. Women pieceworkers at the GEC were not earning as much as women in other places, whilst there was also significant differential within the company. The TGWU argued that:

"The GEC was operating the minimum agreements which we have with your Federation, but we feel that comparisons have to be made on occasions. Obviously, if women feel they are getting so very much less than other workers, they are aggrieved, discontented and dissatisfied workers."²⁰

It seems that there was considerable pay differential not only within the company, but also between the company and other local firms. According to my informants such differential between the GEC and other companies was caused both by a difference in base rate as well as a difference in bonuses paid. For example, during the war women employed by aircraft and other industries were allowed to earn 300% to 400% bonus on their base rate, while the GEC confined the bonus payments to 50% to 100% of the base rate.²¹ While the base rate at GEC was based on the women's rate of pay, the bonus percentage of this particular rate was also smaller relative to the bonus paid by other companies. Differential within the company was also due to the way the bonus pay was linked to particular jobs, when some jobs were more tightly timed relative to others. Prior to 1974 the bonus was an extremely important element of the payment system for the women concerned, for it was the opinion of a female convenor that by the 1960s it comprised of

²⁰ See Works Conference Minutes, 17, Sept. 1943, TGWU and GEC, 208B, TBN 2

²¹ See Works Conference Minutes 1940-45 for further details.

two thirds of the wage packet in some cases.²²

Alongside this it should also be noted that the form of the payment system was itself a recurrent source of dissatisfaction and conflicts. According to a female convenor the bonus could comprise as much as two thirds of some wage packets, whilst the claimed link between experience, competence and bonus level was received sceptically in the light of experience of sectional and individual differentials. For example in 1955 a dispute about the contrasting outcomes of ostensibly comparable work measurement under the Unit System of Bonus went into procedure, when it was reported that:

"On a weekly basis of 44 hours, the difference in cash is, of course disproportionate we find that, under the Machine Shop Chart, the female operator receives 42s. per week bonus, while under the assembly shop chart for the number of units (200) the bonus earnings were only 35s.1d. I am advised that the method of fixing the price of jobs is the same for all females in the company factories, irrespective of the money value of their performance. This means that time of the same standing receives the same value of units."²³

Similarly there were complaints about good and bad jobs and bias in their allocation - a point widely reported in the ethnographic studies of payment systems.

At the other end of this period the low level of women's pay is underlined by the framework within which Equal Pay negotiations proceeded between management and the unions. During these negotiations and post Equal Pay the unions own notion of comparability amounted to a comparison with the unskilled male labourer's rate. All the company conceded, despite its rhetoric regarding pay to very experienced women and 'skilled' women, was one of two of the lowest grades of the semi-skilled male rate.

In this chapter I have outlined the development of the GEC factories in Coventry and the ways in which women workers occupied a central, but subordinate place in the patterns of recruitment, work organisation and job and wage hierarchies. There was considerable continuity

²² Interview with L.S. (b.1929) (Worked at GEC 1955-present)

²³ District Conference Minutes, Box TBN 3, MSS 208 B

in these features across the period from the 1930s to the 1970s, when the women I interviewed worked in the GEC factories in Coventry. In terms of products the company locally continued in the manufacture of telecommunication systems, with only marginal diversification at the consumer end of the mass markets in the post war period. This broadly stable pattern corresponded with developments in the labour process. Three features characterise such development; relatively little mechanization, the retention of labour intensive work methods and female labour. In the following chapters I will explain and analyse the ways in which women experienced these patterns of work, beginning in the next chapter with the question of the women's choice of work at the GEC, their experience of part-time work, and their perceptions of the pay they received. There are absences of firm data on wages for the women concerned and employee numbers according to gender over time, and reasons for such absences are outlined in the appendix.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Women's Experiences of Recruitment and Employment at GEC.

In this chapter I will be looking at employment at the GEC through the experiences of the women I interviewed; and in doing so I am organizing the material around the similarities and differences in their patterns of experience. Out of this material as well as some evidence obtained from interviews with past and present personnel managers I am able to draw out some features of the practices and policies of the company.

In order to elaborate these themes, I have looked at the experience of women according to generational employment cohorts, and in relation to single women, lone women, (one parent families), partnered women, and also migrant women¹ who may also belong to some of the former categories. I will begin by looking at the experience of women recruited during the 1930s. This chapter will be divided into three sections: the first section explains women's preference for employment at GEC, while in the second and third sections I will be dealing with the women's experiences of key features of the particular job market, namely part-time work and low wages. The first section on recruitment, also raises questions about the manner in which women's wages related to patterns of household income and gender relations in the family. It is evident that a fuller understanding of women's attitudes to pay and gender relations would need exploration in more detail than I am able to do. However I have touched on these issues to indicate some of the ways in which they may be important in regard to my major area of concerns.

¹ I have categorised migrant women as those women from outside Coventry, and consists of indigenous British women, women from Eire, the Caribbean, Africa, the Philippines and Eastern Europe, because they are often differentiated from Coventry women in terms of kinship networks.

Single Women In The 1930s.

Joining the GEC

I will now turn to the way single women experienced recruitment to the GEC pre-war. A common background to factory work at GEC during the 1930s is outlined by an informant who reported;

"I went into domestic service when I was fourteen years that was in 1928. My mother thought it best. But I was sacked after some time from the first house. While I was cleaning I stood on a glass table and broke it, so I was sacked. She sacked me on the spot and sent me to my mothers. Another job was found for me fairly quickly. It was in Ansty. There were six servants. I was a parlour maid. You were at their beck and call all the time. On one afternoon each week you were allowed to visit your mother. They didn't allow us to celebrate Christmas. Hard it was. Anyway I just met my husband. We were courting so I left. Well I signed on and got ten shillings dole. I was offered another job as a servant, but I turned it down. I was given only two shillings and six pence each week. I was called before a board of referees and they penalised me and my dole benefit was stopped. That was around 1936. I then heard about work at the GEC. It was the most popular factory in Coventry. Fun it was, but there again the work was awful, and the money was just a pittance, maybe fifteen shillings, or about a pound. I know the money didn't make that much difference, but I was away from the slavery of a parlour maid"²

For this woman life in an industrial setting was much preferable to domestic service, for domestic work curtailed personal freedom, and brought the employee more fully within the control of the employer. While such features made domestic work undesirable among prospective waged workers, there appeared to be little alternative but the dole, and the austere measures characteristic of the 1930s ensured that people were directed into other forms of low paid work.

² Interview with W.M. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1933-6, 1941-3, 1955-66)

Other forms of employment like shop work, or work in the declining hosiery industry failed to offer any real alternative. This respondent's experience of being refused unemployment benefit corresponds with a wider assault on state benefits at the time which included an attack on women as claimants. In the face of such austere conditions, and lack of any real choice, the GEC was the preferred option, though this meant poor pay and conditions. Such a pattern of experience underlines the conditions in the local labour market at the time. The economic depression and job shortage which characterised the 1930s is vividly recalled by many respondents. For example;

"I took my first job in 1924 at the age of fourteen years. I stayed there until I was twenty-one, but then I got dismissed because I asked for a rise. It was the depression. They were not doing well and could not give me an extra ten shillings which I was due. So they sacked me when I asked when it was going to be paid. Then I found a job at the GEC. I was on assembly. There were lots of different sections and jobs. I used to shake like a leaf because I couldn't make a mistake, they were so strict. We were not allowed to eat or anything. You couldn't mess around, you were there just to work."³

Once in the factory women were subject to detailed supervision, while the scope for challenge and any anticipation of a change in circumstances continued to be circumvented by the persistence of male unemployment in the local labour market. The scarcity of jobs for men often appeared to influence women's employment choice and acceptance of working conditions as the next respondent recalls:

"In my first job at GEC I got eleven shillings and six pence. Now my father was out of work, we are talking about the 1930s mind, and half the men had no job. I had to give all my money to my mother to make ends meet, even then it didn't add up to much, you see it was all means testing, and the people nearly starved. And it's not a question that you are not working, you are, and you are still starving. But then you were glad of any job."⁴

³ Interview with M.B. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1930-51)

⁴ Interview with M.H. (b.1910) (Worked at GEC 1930-1940s)

This comment vividly conveys the realities behind job choice for women in the 1930s. It was not a question of choosing a job, but more the immediate priority of having a job -any job that helped to alleviate the poverty characterising life for working class families conditioned by male unemployment. The loss of the male wage not only narrowed job options for women, but also appeared to play an important role in the way such wages were spent:

"My Dad was off work. I was the only one left at home so I had to give up all my money. Well that was normal in those times, you gave up all your wages, but you got some back, perhaps enough for an orange, or something but then you knew you were helping your family. I mean the kids today would consider that outrageous, hysterical, but I grew up and could fight my own battles."⁵

In such cases male unemployment transformed these women into breadwinners, and the female wage was stretched to eke out a living for the family. While the male breadwinner relied on the dole, such women found themselves supporting their immediate family, though their wages were not intended to take this into account. One of the effects of this for the women concerned was that waged work in such circumstances provided them with little independence, unlike other women, were unable to save for marriage and the opportunity to move out of the family home.

As I have outlined above a significant feature of work experience for single women in the 1930s was that they had to submit much of their meagre wages to the household, usually passing it over to the mother. If the household enjoyed other sources of income, then some of the money was put aside for the female wage earner in anticipation of marriage:

"When I first began work, my mother saved part of my wages for a new wool over coat. This lasted me many years. Some of my money was saved for me, they always did that for you. It was a way of saving for marriage."⁶

⁵ Interview with L.A. (b.1921) (Worked at OBC 1950-55)

⁶ *ibid*

The pattern of handing over wages to the mother shows the importance of the mother as the financial executor within the family. If the family enjoyed other forms of income then the mother acted as a trustee over the daughter's earnings, addressing immediate material needs and importantly preparing her for marriage. The money saved for the 'bottom drawer' was the provision for the setting up of a home once marriage was contemplated. Such a pattern suggests that receipt of an independent wage did not necessarily evoke a sense of independence; for such women were not executors of their own wages in either case.

Yet it was under these conditions that some women felt relatively advantaged having secured jobs at GEC:

"My father had connections at the GEC, he built a complete section for them. He inquired about a job for me. That was in 1931, and the effects of depression were severe. It was a very difficult to find work, work suited to a young lady. When I first started work, the girls were out three months at a time. Remember fathers were also unemployed, so girls had to pay their board. Well I was given a job at the age of fourteen as a messenger girl. I didn't work Saturday and could finish at four o'clock. They didn't pay a stamp for me, but gave me a job at sixteen. It was slave labour because the pay was so poor, but the work was light and clean and regular."⁷

The trade-off between pay and conditions identified by this woman was very much a shared experience among the older group.

Furthermore kin⁸ formed an important link in securing a job. At GEC low wages and subordination were exchanged for clean working conditions, and this elevated the company above the traditional engineering sector.

"Well my father was a master craftsman, and as a craftsman he did not allow us to do just anything. So when I finally got a job in the wiring shop he was very pleased. They only

⁷ Interview with M.P. (b.1918) (Worked at GEC 1933-52)

⁸ Thompson (1988) argues that this pattern of job procurement was also common among car workers in Coventry.

employed a certain class of person in those days. You know they wouldn't have taken just anybody. I don't think there was a particular criteria, but the girls were more reserved and were very much young ladies. They felt they could choose a better class of person, there was a lot of people wanting to work. And of course when the war started, it changed all that. Production increased and more workers were needed. After all, the bosses could no longer choose, and you got all sorts in the wiring shop after that."⁹

Indeed the father of this respondent considered the factory a suitable milieu for his daughter, because it was selective about who it employed, and offered clean working conditions. In such conditions patriarchal values were incorporated into a specifically gendered employment structure, and there is a strong suggestion the this pattern gained distinctive class connotations of 'respectability'. The image projected by the GBC was perceived as a rejection of dirt, thus distinguished from particular kinds of manual work.¹⁰

Job choice for such women was underlined partly by the circumstances of the male breadwinner. The priority for such women was to find paid work, when their wages either contributed to the immediate needs of the family, or was saved in anticipation of marriage. The evidence suggests that such women were still dependent on the services of the family household, for their wages were not sufficient to sustain them independently. On the other hand women in such circumstances were relatively advantaged when compared with single migrant women, for they marginally benefited from the range of services provided by the household in terms of the unpaid labour of the mother and the social and emotional support provided by their respective families. In this section I have attempted to indicate some features of the local job market played an influential role in the women's choice of work at GEC. I will now examine the responses of

⁹ Interview with N.B. (b.1917) (Worked at GBC 1932-77)

¹⁰ Cleanliness is not always so clearly seen in such positive terms, as Cockburn's study of the print work-shops. "The men are used to believing that a working man is one who has black hands as are white dandy. If you have clean hands you are seen as a professional. But I don't know. As electronics engineer, he is a very clever person, yet he gets his hands dirty." C. Cockburn, (1983) p144. For working class men cleanliness is perceived ambivalently, on the one hand, while it may indicate upward social mobility, as the women stress it may symbolise an erosion of masculinity. The implication of my informant's comments is that a different set of meanings are evoked for women, including an endorsement of femininity, and in close terms, is reflected in upward social mobility.

migrant women during the inter-war era.

In contrast to the previous accounts the following respondents were migrants at time of their recruitment to GEC, a factor which appears to have influenced the way they perceived and coped with the particular work. Such features characterizing migration as isolation in the host community appears to have accentuated the problems of having to cope with the demands of the work:

"I came to Coventry in 1938 more by accident than anything else. I had no idea what it was about. We found rooms with people we met, who took us to look for factory work which was growing at the time. We took jobs at the GEC in Stoke. I had never stood inside a factory before, nor indeed even seen one. I was on coilwinding and then I did assembly. It was awful. The work was totally meaningless. The atmosphere was horrid. I mean you had to be there at seven thirty and clock on. Well I never experienced anything like it. The money was poor and you could hardly eat. Life was lonely, I just hated, loathed the place. We knew no-one there and felt trapped. After some time, I joined the Irish community and got to know people. We met a lot of nurses from Gulaon Rd Hospital. I was advised I could do nursing as long as I did not tell them I was in a factory. So I got taken on. In those days you became a pre-student and did tests and if you passed you did your training. I was lucky I trained."¹¹

A second respondent also underlined the negative features of work experience in GEC, explaining how she too left the industrial setting for nursing:

"I came over to England in the late 1930s. There was someone leaving from home, and I just came along. The girl had a relative here, so I just stayed there. Of course, you had to find some kind of work immediately, but there wasn't any really. I had written toHospital, and was waiting for them to say they would take me. Well this girl's aunt had a job in the GEC at Stoke, and she took me along for a job. Now you understand, my stay was short, as it would have been an utter disgrace to tell the people at home that I was

¹¹ Interview with B.D. (b.1920) (Worked at GEC 1940s)

in a factory. My God, there was no respect at home for that. They used to say it was all right for the B....., who were used to it after all, but not us. I can hardly remember what work I did, I only remember working as a bench on my own. It was awful, you couldn't get to know anyone, there was no time, and then people just went home after work. No it was not a happy time for me."¹²

The first of these extracts clearly registers the problems of managing as a single migrant woman on the money paid at GEC, and implies that being outside a household based on a male wage and a variety of other supports acts to discourage the newly arrived and single women from the GEC. These comments also highlight the significance of distinctive class and cultural identities, for these two particular women had not intended to work in factories. The rejection of the GEC by these women is a rejection of that particular type of work and workplace, and is not in any clear sense a rejection of the overall pattern of waged labour for women. The respondents came from a society characterised by a rural community of small independent farmers, where particular notions of class and cultural identities were important. Nursing was a much preferred occupation for some of the young Irish migrants who came from these backgrounds where such patriarchal institutions as the Catholic Church and the family located women in traditional roles. Nursing probably reflected the caring aspect of the female image so strongly fostered by this culture. It was perceived as more respectable. Moreover, it was a closed institution giving the veneer of protection to young women, and a more patriarchal institution echoing life in convent schools. For such people factory work symbolised degradation, though in reality nursing also involved stereotypically female work at relatively exploitative rates of pay. Having outlined some aspects of women's pre-war experience of joining and leaving the GEC I will now summarise and compare the experience of single women in the post-war decades.

Single Women In The Post War Decades

Recruitment to the GEC for the younger generation of women was sometimes through kin, and it was common knowledge that a woman could find a job at the GEC. It was a case of

¹² Interview with T.A. (b.1930) (Worked at GEC 1940s)

discovering which plant required labour. The most frequently reported method of recruitment was one where prospective job hunters paid personal visits to a particular plant, and could expect to be given a job. Women from this age group often shared the experiences of the earlier cohort - in that circumstances concerning the male breadwinner often made an incoming wage a priority for such women:

"Well I wanted to leave school early and start work so I could help Mum, I mean Dad was a miner and liked his beer. I mean she always worked and wanted to do her best. So I gave her my board but there again we got everything done for us. I left school and I wanted to work because there was no money coming in, and that was in the 1960s. My father liked to take a drink. My mother worked as a cleaner. There were eight of us, so we had no luxuries, so work was essential for me to help Mum."¹³

While the experiences of different generations are separated by history, they are united by their initiation within the labour market and in this case echo similar sentiments, reflecting a compulsion to enter waged labour to help sustain the working class family. The biggest differences between the younger and the older cohort of single women arose because they lived their youth in rather different labour market conditions in Coventry. For the daughter it was a period of full employment, when Coventry was regarded as an affluent male wage economy. However this excerpt serves as a reminder that for women this affluence was far from universal or dependable, given both insecurities in the male labour market and conflict in the domestic sphere. In such circumstances work remained primarily a way of assisting the family economy. Similar features are highlighted in the following extract where a young migrant woman recalls her first experiences of work at GEC, and her perceptions of the wage. It is noteworthy that in contrast to these older migrants I discussed earlier she lived with her family of birth who had also migrated from Eire:

¹³ Interview with W.G. (b.1945) (Worked at GEC 1961-72)

"Well in the early 1960's I had wanted to be a pop singer. It was my dream. I didn't get very far although I could sing. That was for people with some money and connections I have since learned. I got a job at the age of seventeen at the GBC. We all immigrated that year, mother, father, all the family. We lived in a very small terraced house in the inner city. There wasn't much money, although everyone thinks there was, my Dad didn't have a good job. He was a construction worker, and was at the time getting older, and then could only do the less well paid jobs. It wasn't regular, they were 'rained off', or the job finished, and then in the winter he was often not at work for weeks on end. That's how it went. But Mum had a job at the GBC, and that helped. I handed over the best part of my money to my Mum until I got married at eighteen. But then I didn't need much money except to buy clothes and makeup. My boyfriend helped me out too, and I had all the facilities at home. Mum did my washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning, and I mean you didn't even have to buy shampoo. My Mum made sure we had everything, she never saw why we should suffer like she did."¹⁴

This comment highlights similar themes to those of the previous informant; a sense of limited opportunities in the labour market, the impoverishment resulting from an uncertain and inadequate male wage; and the importance of the unpaid labour of the housewife, who was also a waged worker. However, in contrast to the older single migrant cohort this woman's recollections show the importance of the immediate family and equally important the household, particularly the pooling of resources and the unwaged labour of housewives as a counterpart to her involvement in low waged work.

There is also a hint in this comment that the disadvantages of such wages and work were tolerated through diverting energy and interests in other directions. Other respondents continuously suggest that this generation of women enjoyed the availability of a commoditised youth culture, something totally absent for their mothers. Increasingly young women retained much of their wages, while beyond this it was the mother who facilitated participation in the youth culture

¹⁴ Interview with B.C. (Born 1948) (Worked at GBC 1962-1972)

and marriage market. The following excerpt eloquently outlines the meaning of this:

"I loved new clothes and going out. I mean it was supposed to be promiscuous and all that but it clearly wasn't. I met a boy who became my husband, and we saved. But my Mum did my washing and ironing, took my clothes to the cleaners, bought the food, well did everything really, so she never gained from me being at work.¹⁵

Similar sentiments are echoed by the following respondent:

"Well you didn't worry all the time about being in a factory, because you had something to look forward to. I mean we went out in large groups, and everything was done at home for me, my Mum helped us out, even lending us money if we hadn't got paid."¹⁶

Recruitment and job choice for the older cohort was influenced by a number of factors: firstly economic necessity caused through male unemployment and a shortage of work. Secondly securing a job sometimes depended on networks through male kin -where work conditions at GBC offered perceived or real relative improvement in contrast to other workplaces in exchange for low wages. Thirdly the evidence suggests that the experience of waged work for such women had implications for gender relations, and as such afforded little independence for the women concerned.

By the post war period the workplace was established as 'a woman's factory' recruiting single women who appear to see work as a means to an end. From the evidence outlined it seems that for younger women the GBC offered a wage which often helped to sustain their families, and also gave them access to a social life hitherto unknown to young people. Another key distinction between the older and younger women is the difference in their attitude to work at GBC. Older women appear to convey a sense of gratitude that they were in work, while for the younger women this is much more taken for granted. The question of the implications of waged work and gender relations has only been tentatively addressed in this chapter, and raises further questions which I am not able to address given the remit of my research. In the next section I will

¹⁵ Interview with W.G. (b.1944) (Worked at GBC 1961-72)

¹⁶ Interview with B.C. (b.1948) (Worked at GBC 1962-1972)

address another feature of work experience at GEC, namely part-time work.

Part-Time Work, "Hours To Suit You"

As I have already noted part-time shifts were an important component of the job structure at the GEC particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. This section will discuss the experiences of women in part-time work. A variety of experiences will be explored with a view to highlighting the range of varying domestic and economic circumstances of the women concerned. I will also take account of the company's views of this type of job structure. Material for this section includes interviews with the women concerned and with both past and present management personnel.

There were five different part-time shifts, including shifts organized during normal working hours. The majority of women I spoke to worked part-time at some point during their work history with the company. It may therefore be discerned that work organized on such a basis formed a significant feature of the labour process at the GEC. In their discussion of part-time work Beechey and Perkins (1986) explain it as a new form of post war job structure predominantly employing married women. They argue that employers reasons for creating part-time work changed over time: it served as a means to make labour available in the immediate post-war period characterised by a labour shortage, and as a way of introducing flexibility of labour in a period of capitalist crisis in the 1970s.

This explanation of the rise and survival of part-time work has resonance in the company's explanations:

"It is all to do with the availability of labour. You see if you go back to the 1950s and 1960s there was a labour shortage in Coventry and you had to attract people by offering the hours they were prepared to work; and because we were aiming our recruitment at women; women would come along and say we'd like to work for you, but we can't do a full shift. Family responsibilities are such we can't do it, we can do mornings or afternoons. So in response to that we developed part-time shifts in the daytime as well as the evening shift."¹

¹ Interview with Personnel Manager (b. unknown) (GEC 1963-present)

This comment corresponds with part of the Beechey and Perkins analysis. The creation of part-time shifts at GBC was a response to a labour shortage geared to target a specific reserve of labour, women with domestic responsibilities.²

However, according to the women's recollections the company went to considerable lengths to contact them:

"Well I can well remember the time when they printed recruiting leaflets and paid somebody to deliver them to whole areas within the city. For instance they leafleted the whole of W....., because it was nearer to the Brandon Rd and the Stoke Plants. You see this at the time was a new housing estate and there was no one living on it but very young families, young Mums with kids who might perhaps be able to work a few hours. There again twenty hours was about the least you could work, so it shows they were short of workers"³

This comment demonstrated that in this instance the company went beyond traditional channels to recruit a new group of potential workers. Young mothers with young families were contacted.⁴ Appeals were made to women in terms such as:

"Jobs at the GEC. Hours to suit you."⁵

This was a way of reaching people outside the mainstream labour market. The aim was to make available what was otherwise a dormant source of labour, enticing them with flexible working hours. However the difficulties facing such women were not always considered:

"But of course the young mums who lived in the area were also five or six miles from their parents. Mum no longer lived down the street. There were no shops, no buses and anyway

² This trend has also been documented in other studies, for instance see Pearson, R. in *The Changing Experience of Employment* ed. K. Purcell, (1986) on the targeting of specific categories of female labour in Third World labour markets.

³ Interview with L.S. (b.1929) (Worked at GBC 1955-1957, 1957-present)

⁴ Recruitment strategies until the mid 1950s included his networks, advertising, though the local newspapers, the local Labour Exchange, and by word of mouth. Leafletting then began to be used. It was a more direct method and a reflection of the urgency of the shortage of labour. In a period of full employment very few persons were registered as unemployed, thus available for work. Since married women are not entitled to unemployment benefit, even if they wanted to work, they did not register. It would appear that for this combination of reasons, the GBC adopted a more direct and personal approach to recruitment.

⁵ Interview with L.W. (b.1926) (Worked at GBC 1940s, 1950-present)

who would look after the children. Only single parents could get their children into the nursery.⁶

The importance of this comment is that it highlights the way in which the decline of the inner city in Coventry and the shift of working class housing to the outskirts of the city had the effect of spatially separating the family into generation specific units.⁷ Furthermore, while the opportunity to work might have a certain attraction to women who had specific domestic responsibilities, this in itself was insufficient, for such women needed a further backup. For some women this meant relying on kin, for instance:

"Helen Street Works was near where I lived, and my Mum said if you want to go and do a little part-time job, around there is fine, you could go from one o'clock to five o'clock. Now my Mum lived in Peel Street and I lived in the next street, so she had Valerie. I was in to get the dinner on the table"⁸

This comment set in the late 1940's conjured up the ideal picture behind the creation of the part-time shift from this respondent's perspective. Two important criteria were fulfilled: child care was available through kin, and she wanted a job which could be fitted into her domestic commitments. However, referring to the earlier discussion with management this respondent represented the stereotypical female employee, someone who had some spare time outside of her domestic commitments, and was dependent on an affluent male wage. Her partner was at the

⁶ Interview With L.B. (b.1929) (Worked at GBC 1955-57, 1957-present))

⁷ Demographic changes which occurred post-war brought about changes in the working family structure, which had implications for child care and the way women coped with the duality of their roles. Both traditional working class family structures and their inner city environments were in decline. The study by Kuper (1953) looks at Coventry in the pre-war period, and attempts to examine the effects of the shift in styles of housing from the old traditional working class to the newer more detached styles. However, housing alone does not define the behaviour of a community, a point highlighted when he discusses the way migrants are perceived by the host community. The picture he portrayed of Coventry was one where there were the beginnings of a tendency for people to experience their life styles within the family, and to associate almost exclusively with their own ethnic community. Although I did not investigate this issue, during the course of interviewing, particularly when talking to indigenous Coventrians representing the older group, it seems that the old life styles had disappeared for some people, with a shift particularly for younger people to the newly built large public sector housing estates on the outskirts of Coventry. This provided very few public utilities like shopping areas and an adequate bus service essential if women were to attempt to combine the double burden. These problems would have heightened the isolation particularly for single mothers from outside the community. However, the notion of the extended family was still a reality for some local women in the 1950s.

⁸ Interview with M.B. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1948-55)

time a skilled vehicle builder, and she still enjoyed the support of her natal family, where child-minding was undertaken by the child's grandmother. The notion of the extended family depicted in the former example was certainly important.⁹ This showed that the women concerned relied on kin, particularly the grandmother, when help was needed with child care, but changes in the organization of working class dwellings could easily disrupt this. However while the company assumed that such women could rely on kin, they further assumed that the male spouse would be available:

"Well there are two reasons for part-time shifts. One is that shift working is done for economic reasons and at the moment is to use up the space and the equipment, and the second reason is the availability of labour. As an employer of female labour it was not realistic nor practical to employ a lot of women on night shift, and an evening shift is attractive to a lot of women if they have family responsibility; in other words if they need the bit of extra money the husband comes home at four o'clock and the wife can then leave to do four hours work."¹⁰

Such an attitude was based on the assumption that these women workers were located within a standard nuclear family with male breadwinner and a conventional division of domestic labour. And for some such partnered women part-time work appeared to offer advantages:

"Well six to ten o'clock was just wonderful, you see I had everything organized. R. and the children came home at mid-day when we had the main meal together. I did my housework in the morning, you see I was up at six o'clock. But I rested every afternoon. R.

⁹ However, about this period the shape of the traditional working class family was changing locally. Streets housing two generations of families began to disappear. While I do not wish to romanticise the past, Willmott and Young's (1957) well known study in London suggest that structural change brought about the breakdown of family networks, such as the mother centred family. The trend identified by the authors sheds light on some of the changes in Coveysey at that time. Many of the younger respondents particularly in the post war period relied on kin to help with child care. However it is important to distinguish what is meant by kin. Kin for the younger women meant their partner. This mostly meant the male spouse who relieved the female for an evening shift. The other way women coped was to work the nine to three - thirty shift, but this excluded mothers with very young children. Even then childminders were used. Looking at the reality of the part-time shift from the women's perspective, clearly it was not a model appropriate to the needs of all women workers.

¹⁰ Interview with Personnel Manager (b. unknown) (Worked at QBC 1963 present)

came home at five o'clock and took over. Then of course we bought a television and there was something for them to do. When I got back after ten o'clock, everyone was in bed. You see R... was able to do everything. We are partners. But I missed a lot of our evenings together as a family"¹¹

This comment depicted the successful combination of both the responsibilities of the family and the demands of waged work. Crucial to this arrangement from this woman's perspective was the participation of the spouse who appeared committed to a more democratic division of labour within the household. It is in this type of circumstance that the part-time shift accommodated the needs of women as mothers, and housewives.

However even when women recalled the advantages, they are also aware of the underlying tensions, the contradictions between their perceptions of the mothering role, and the demands made on their labour as an aspect of their mothering role. In the case of the twilight shift women felt they "missed out". They relied on the co-operation and willingness of the spouse to forego his leisure time, in order to commence his shift in the home. In this context there was a real "appreciation" of advantages in part-time work, but I would argue that both spouses were nevertheless obliged to make sacrifices in this case. This is illustrated by the following comment:

"You see everything is fifty, fifty in this house. I went to work when the oldest child was three and that was in 1953. I did the six to ten shift at the CEC. But it gave me something to think about, look forward to. It was very important, it brought money and that brought happiness. But it was a very convenient shift, the main advantage was children's times were covered. I was always there for school holidays, and during the day then J... was there in the evenings. J... came home at lunchtime, and the children came home from school, so you see we had a meal together. In the holidays I got my work done in the mornings, and spent the afternoon with the children. Otherwise I had my afternoons free, and had time for myself. When I got home at night J... was in bed. Then of course television

¹¹ Interview with H.C. (b.1926) (Worked at CEC 1940-44, 1953-64)

became more popular, and that was an added entertainment for them. But of course, on evenings you miss out a lot, there wasn't a trade union, well I mean a shop steward, and it wasn't until I went full time on days that I knew there were unions there at all. But J... was always in a union, and we are union minded, well you have got to be, it is your only protection. And you know part-timers are always in danger, I mean you can be sacked just like that without recompense, for no other reason than work has dried up. Well, I heard that the part-time work were to be put off, so I began asking about, making feelers for other work. So I was told by the foreman they wanted some people in transmission on days, and that's how I got there."¹²

This is the double edged nature of the part-time shift, it was counted both as a blessing and a burden. The blessings were realized in having more money in the household. Money had the power to provide a certain kind of freedom, the freedom from material deprivation, which so often characterizes working class life. At the same time the availability of work at unsocial hours denied freedom in another form, the freedom to share one's family. These were some of the contradictory effects of part-time work on the twilight shift.

Although the company was eager to highlight the assumed advantages characteristic of such work, particularly the evening shift - this view was not always portrayed in equally glowing terms by the women concerned. One who worked at GEC from the mid 1950s said:

"I had been working on a full-time basis, and had a child minder, well my father was dying and my mother came to me and said I need help, so I gave up work. I was at home for about six weeks, when one day the foreman came to see and said, "I'm well and truly in the mire, can you come and work for me, any hours you like, and when you like. I replied that I would come in on the evening shift, I needed the money. I did it for about eight weeks, and I would never do it again, not for double the money. It was awful. I will tell you why, I'm a grafter and I get up after six. Ok by five o'clock you are preparing to go out to work,

¹² Interview with T.D (b.1928) (Worked at GEC 1950s-1984)

but you have done a day's work already. And you see because it is only four hours, you really flog yourself because you want the money. And I can assure you it was a hell of a life. Then you go out and wait for a bus that never comes, so you get home after eleven o'clock. Women don't do that shift from choice they do because they have to. They have kids, or the old man is plain awkward, they do it because they need the money, and if they say it is for pin money they are bl.... good liars, they may be paid buttons..."¹³

This comment made a number of important points. Firstly, it challenged the company's ideal image of the part-time arrangement as the solution for the two partnered employed nuclear family. Organizing the household on a shift system, expecting the male partner to resume the female partner's duties at the end of his waged working day, was not an alternative to socialized child care. The evening shift offered partnered women the possibility of earning. However this still hinged on the willingness of a spouse, and in this case even with the help of the spouse the difficulties it presented were considerable in terms of the organization and the stamina of the woman concerned, and hinted that such work demanded a particular sacrifice. For many such women the logic celebrated by management meshed relatively neatly with their immediate priorities, but, as many feminist critics of familialism have explained, this assumption ignores the range of circumstances of women workers, and particularly the lot of lone parents.

While these women represented only a large minority of my informants, their reflections underline the constraints built into the organization of part-time work. Some of my lone parent informants sharply underlined the constrained character of the choices involved, and the unsatisfactory features of such work:

"I had been at the GEC for four years when I left my husband. I had been working a nine to four shift. By then my daughter was old enough to be left with a key. I could then go and get money. So I left the GEC for a clerical job in a motor factory where the real money was. You see my children were growing and needed more. I could not at all survive on the

¹³ Interview with L.S. (Born 1929) (Worked at GEC 1955-57, 1957-present)

meager wage offered by the GEC."¹⁴

The wages accrued through part-time work failed to match the demands of a breadwinner's role. In this case, financial commitments shifted from one of dependency to the position of major breadwinner, and while the absence of child care placed a heavy onus on the respondent to work part-time, once the domestic pressure has eased the respondent took the opportunity to seek better paying work on a full-time basis outside the GEC. So in the case of lone parents the availability of part-time work was seen sometimes during the 1930s as a temporary expedient in coping with what was a critical period in their lives:

"Well, we came back to England in 1958 from Cyprus. I arrived in March, and I remember I left Nicosia it was beautiful sunshine, and we arrived at Heathrow it was snowing. The snow was knee high, and my daughter screamed because of the cold on her face. Soon afterwards, my husband said it was all over. We were finished. There I was left without a penny. I went down to the DHSS, but all they could think of was maintenance, and anyway they give you so little money, it is almost impossible to manage. And of course getting money from a man who is not interested in you is demoralising and futile, so a job was the answer. I applied back to Whitmans where I had previously worked. They insisted that I worked full-time from eight o'clock in the morning until five thirty in the evening. And I couldn't face the prospect of that. What would happen to my daughter. I had always done clerical work, but you see they didn't in those days offer such jobs on a part-time basis. I had heard of this 9.00 to 4.00 shift at the GEC. But I was interviewed at GEC for clerical work, the problem was that it was very badly paid. They suggested that I take a job in the factory. So I needed the money and I took the job at Spon St. It was in Special Systems. It was just starting up. They were doing automatic controls for power stations. It was not too bad, after all, it was the only place I could find a part-time job."¹⁵

¹⁴ Interview with L.A. (b.1921) (Worked at GEC 1950-55)

¹⁵ Interview with K.G. (b.1925) (Worked at GEC 1958-83)

These examples provide an illustration of the way women could be penalized in the labour market for having child care responsibilities and of their consciousness of the penalties involved. In this instance the opportunity to work on a higher status job in a better paying firm has been sacrificed because the respondent's choice was to prioritize the caring aspect of the parental role.

Clearly the company's employment strategy exploited the contradictory pressures bearing upon these women. At the same time the limited opportunities they did provide were often seen favourably despite the sacrifices involved:

"Well of course the GEC was good in some ways. I found myself in a very vulnerable situation, I had no house after the desertion. The Council put me on an emergency housing list. A flat was soon secured, but I had no furniture, and no money. I had applied to Rolls Royce, that was for clerical work I had always done that. That was what I had done in the Civil Service. Anyway, they insisted that I worked full time from 8.00 until 5.30 in those days. I then heard that there was a job in the GEC and that was from 9.00 until 4.00, but I wanted clerical work, but you see there although I had been a civil servant they still refused, because I wouldn't work the full hours. Well here I was a Civil Servant in the past having to resort to manual work, because pay was too low, and I could not do the required hours. My child was an only child and she was like a fish out of water. As I have always argued, my daughter had only one parent, and had lost her father, full-time work would have too much. When she began school I went to work full-time."¹⁶

This is an important comment for it showed that although the respondent was placed in a situation where there was considerable pressure to take full-time employment to gain access to white-collar work, and increase her earnings she rejected it. Although this view was expressed by a member of the older cohort of post-war mothers, it was also shared by the younger women.

It is appropriate to comment on the social context of these choices, sacrifices and relative satisfactions at this point. I would suggest that organization of families, labour markets and state

¹⁶ Interview with M.R. (b.1930) (Worked at GEC 1963-1982)

policy in the post war period placed contradictory demands on women, both to take care of their families and to engage in forms of waged work, which presented a dilemma for the women who did both. This was linked to the nature of the particular pronatalist ideas of the time.¹⁷ This is not an issue I intend to address in detail here, however I think it is important to note that the local and indigenous women who were mothers in the 1950s and the younger women in the 1960s were very defensive about the question of child care. The fact that this group choose part-time work when it was available emphasized their distinctive approach to child care which differed from those of indigenous women who had children before and during the 1940s, and from the approach of many migrant women.

Migrant women in particular often choose to work full-time and combine it with early child rearing:

"Well I always had the idea that I'd have a child minder, and that's what I did, you see it's better, they don't get rid of you so easily, and we certainly needed the money. I do half the housework that's how it was, and anyway I'd prefer that to doing nights or other part-time shifts."¹⁸

In the following extract another migrant woman explains how she resolved some of the cross pressures involved:

"I had five children, but the GEC tried to understand women, especially with children. I think the management was fair in that respect, yes, they were sympathetic. And of course if you had a problem in relation to your children they were very good, especially with part-

¹⁷ The nature of pronatalism is a disputed issue among feminists. The Birmingham (1978) feminist group appear to argue that it encouraged the shift of women back into the home, in a period when they were needed in the economy. On the other hand Riley (1984) disputes that it set out to do this, but rather argues, that while it raised the question of motherhood, it ignored the role of motherhood for working women. She argues, "For it seems that women workers after the war were accepted to a degree, but women as mothers were taken to be wholly different beings, assumed to be always outside production, pursuing a distinct 'creative' task of child-bearing." D. Riley, (1984) Riley may well be correct in that there was a refusal to accept that working women were also mothers. The reality of course was different, women with children did work. The important question is what impact did this ideology have on the mothers who did waged work. I would argue that although according to Riley it was not meant to address this group of women, they often identified themselves as mothers.

¹⁸ Interview with M.F. (b.1944) (Worked at GEC 1960s-1980s)

time work, but you see they always wanted you to go full-time. I mean I started on a full-time job, and I only worked part-time once or so in order to get things sorted out at home. You were better off doing full-time work if you could work things together. I relied on J., the older children and the child minder, and I had a really wonderful child minder, no I did a full days work, and I don't think my children suffered, because we all helped, and then we had more money ...they gave you more if you worked full-time"¹⁹

This perspective represented the view of a migrant woman who appeared to prefer full-time work, seeing it as a trade-off for bigger wages with a company who she regarded as sympathetic to women's domestic concerns. At the same time that this apparent tradeoff was underlined by company pressure to consider full-time work. In a way she appreciated the availability of part-time, and saw it as a safety net to be used if necessary in times of need.

On the other hand such work organization provided very unstable patterns of employment for the women concerned, for job loss for part-time workers was inevitable. The reality of this was vividly recalled, as E... explains:

"Well, you see working the six to ten shift you were on tender hooks, you knew it wouldn't last. They were doing you a favour, I mean who else could give you those hours. The shift was always going, but never lasting, it was to serve a purpose. I heard rumours that it was going flat, and I went to the foreman and said I wanted to go full-time, that's how you avoided the door."²⁰

This brings out the tension between the notion of the understanding employer and the idea of flexibility.²¹ For women this often was presented as their choice between plants and jobs:

¹⁹ Interview with E.B. (b. 1921) (Worked at GBC 1958-60, 1961-80)

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ The notion of the understanding employer has some resonance in other studies too. Although there are arguments against locating the oppression of women in the family, the fact that women experience the combination of managing productive and reproductive work as problematic cannot avoid the way outside and powerful institutions come to shape women's relationship to work. This question is eloquently raised by C. Freeman in *Wage* (1982). She argues that because of the way child care is categorized by the state and ideology as a private function, it is thus the responsibility of the mother, and precedence of that role means employers are able to utilise this situation to their advantage. Women's unavailability for longer work schedules is reinterpreted as weaknesses of women in their capacities as workers by actual or potential employers. Employers then use this as a lever to harness women's labour in very exploitative conditions. While this is masked by paternalism, it actually depends on the prior disadvantage of women positioned as the ex-

"Well, I never got more than four pounds on the part-time jobs. But there again a pound was worth 240 pence, and I guess seemed to stretch a long way. I was first in Victoria Rd. doing complicated wiring, I hated that, too slow, no money is all I can say. I asked for a transfer, so they sent me downstairs where I learned to read prints, do assembly, and for some reason I got a transfer to Ford St. But it was so hard to earn any money, I was on cableforming that is a slow complicated job. I asked for another transfer and I went to Spon St. or was it. I know that was on track work, I could earn better money. Then I went full-time at Stoke."²²

The inability to earn an acceptable wage pushed the respondent from one plant to another, only to find similar conditions. Finally she resorted to full-time work. While R.....'s account focuses more on the Electrical Engineering section, the next interviewee recalled working in the Mechanical section at Helen St, and argued that the company disproportionately benefited from the part-time workers:

"If you are only there four hours per day, you have to make the most of it. Actually they used to say they employed a lot of us part-timers, and our foreman said it also. They used to get more work out of the part-timers. I can understand how this is the case, well you go in all fresh, and you know that you have only one morning, or whatever, and you are keen to do more, while the full-timers have to last all day. Well, when I went home my arm used to ache like mad, but I dared not mention it in the house. I knew my husband would say, it serves you right for going." And that's what we were up against."²³

This conveys the experience of working a morning shift in the machine shop in the early 1950s. This together with the previous comment builds up an image of the part-time worker as one who was eager to please, was flexible and was desperately trying to retain the delicate balance between home and work, between consolidating the time spent in work and earning money.

creative enactment of dual roles. Understood in this framework employers are able to capitalise on women's prior disadvantage to their advantage. Patriarchalism becomes the facade obscuring discrimination.

²² Interview with R.B. (b.1922) (Worked at QBC 1950s-1982)

²³ Interview with Mrs.B. (Born 1914) (Worked at QBC 1950s)

and retaining the energy to fulfill the domestic role. This respondent argued that part-time women were preferred because they worked harder, a factor endorsed by a former works manager from the same plant:

"Well you see it wasn't inefficient to that degree to have so many part-timers, because otherwise machines and space were left vacant, and you still had to heat the place, and the beauty of it was, we were able to retain our skilled women, once they left and had a family they came back to work from 9.00-3.00 O'clock, which was better than not having anyone. And also you found that the people who came in for shorter hours seemed on average for whatever reason to put in a lot more effort, and were more co-operative than those full-timers. Now the evening shift were really good."²⁴

The company, then, benefited from the organization of work on a part-time basis for three reasons. Firstly, they were able to secure the women they had previously trained, workers this manager recognized as "skilled"; secondly, part-timers were relatively more co-operative, and thirdly they put more effort into the work.

In contrast discussions with the women concerned presented a very different picture:

"Three times I have been and left the GEC. I began there in 1934 and I stayed until the shop went flat. I never really left the GEC, it was that I eventually had to finish. During the war I worked at Baginton, the aircraft place. I got married while I was there and then I left to have my first child. My husband soon left me. I was then forced to go out and work, and I had to work full-time, there were no part-time jobs, and anyway you couldn't earn anywhere near enough. I was stranded with no relatives around. My mother-in-law came to live with us for the first four years and I paid her ten shillings a week and bought all the food. I found work at the GEC, and stayed for a while. Then I got a better paying job at a diamond cutting place. I left that again to return to the GEC. I worked part-time, but left that because the money was less than useless. After he grew up I went back. But I left

²⁴ Interview with Retired Works Manager (b.1913) (Worked at GEC 1927-77)

finally at the age of fifty nine, when I took voluntary redundancy. O.K. we could work part-time, but that was only because they were short after the war, I mean I couldn't when I was first stranded. But working part-time pushed you into the poverty trap, something I wanted to avoid. I mean I sent my son to Babiak, he wasn't going to be deprived.²⁵

This informant had moved from Derbyshire to Coventry in the late 1920s or early 1930s surveying a period of four decades and was able to compare the experience of the lack of part-time work with its availability, while also delineating some of the contradictions. On the one hand it provided an opportunity to work at convenient hours, it pushed such women into a poverty trap at a period when they needed more help. The next respondent is a local woman born in Coventry and is discussing work choices in the late 1930s or very early 1940s. The decision to reject the possibility of working part-time was based on economic circumstances, while the contradictions incurred through working full time were resolved privately:

"I simply couldn't survive on part-time work, no matter how convenient it was. So I took to working full-time, but this meant that I managed to get up at six o'clock each morning hail, rain or snow. It was heart breaking to have to take your child out to be minded at that hour, somehow it was not right, but that was how it was. Now mind I'm talking about full-time but there again the money in those days was not at all adequate. Well, the GEC was the poorest payer, now that ought give you some idea.²⁶

This provides an illustration of the contradictions facing lone women. Lone parents were caught in a vicious circle where if they traded convenient working hours hoping to spend more time with children, overt poverty was the consequence; and in the opposite case if they traded longer working hours for relatively more money, it meant imposing certain harsh conditions on the children, for which they personally felt a sense of guilt. Such evidence suggests that single parent women tended to work full-time up until the war period, when they experienced the problems associated with part-time wages - which they often abandoned for improved wages and full-

²⁵ Interview with E.H. b.1910 (Worked at GBC 1934-40, 1948-9, 1958-73)

²⁶ Interview with L.F. (b.1914) (Worked at 1938-50)

time work accompanied by a sense of guilt.

While part-time work represented a problematical trade-off for many women, being relatively attractive to those with both partners with young children, and particularly for lone women, the company adjusted its shift policy according to the logic of its own distinctive needs. In this context such policy took little account of the needs of the women:

"As the years went by the requirement of labour has diminished, in other words we are more in tune with supply. And part-time shifts were not at all economic for us to do, they were much more convenient for the women, but if you have got no alternative you have got to do it that way. We now have reduced that, and we don't have any day part-time workers at all, but we do continue with the evening shift, and that is very convenient to women as I said before, and of course we are utilizing plant."²⁷

This comment explained the disappearance of some forms of part-time shifts, like those worked during normal working hours, a change that has been linked to a sufficient supply of labour fulfilling labour requirements with full-time vacancies. In the light of such change the only part-time shifts now preserved were the evening twilight shifts worked during unsocial hours in order to utilize plant and equipment.

Clearly such changes underline the insecurities which always accompanied part-time work, but which changed somewhat in character with the evolution of the company's part-time policy. My evidence shows that a considerable number of the women I interviewed, particularly among the older cohort, left the GBC, but returned a second, and sometimes a third time. For instance:

"My first job at GBC was in 1940. I was on Wiring. They were doing Radios on a government contract. That was in Stoke. I think I left in 1943, no, it was in 1944, because I left to have our Robert. That was on a full-time basis, I mean I had no children, and the war was on, but I got married while I was there. I had Trevor also and in 1953 I went back to the GBC. This was on the twilight shift as it was called. It was from six to ten o'clock. I went

²⁷ Interview with Personnel Manager, (b. unknown) (Worked at GBC 1963-present)

full-time after four years, and wanted to stay this end of town, so I got a job at Brandon Rd. Then that shut down, and I got the chance to transfer to Stoke. There was yet another set of redundancies, but that was in 1970, and there was a chance to move to Spon St.²⁸

The experience recounted in this excerpt can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly it can be seen that the company was responsive to the needs of its workers, but secondly it suggests that this method of work organization previously met the company's labour requirements. In the first instance, the interplay between full and part-time work intimated the company's accommodation to the needs of women workers with other responsibilities, but at the same time a recognition of the flexibility involved indicates how part-time work realized the company's needs. Beechey and Perkins, using the Summerfield study of women's experiences in war-time, tend to confirm this point:

"part-time women were thought to be positively advantageous on a number of grounds: (a) they were more productive; (b) they stimulated a new and faster pace in the workshops; (c) they showed only half the rate of absenteeism and were better time-keepers; and (d) they were particularly good at doing the most unpopular types of work."²⁹

In the case of the GEC, the spinoff for the company was that work organized in a variety of part-time shifts, which allowed women to work at hours convenient to them, stabilized the internal labour market, and retained proven and experienced thus skilled labour. Secondly, the notion of flexibility had equal resonance in the transfer of labour during periods of contraction, in the sense that moving from one job, shift, or plant concealed the inherently unstable nature of the labour market in a period of full employment.

My interview material certainly suggests that part-time shifts involved a more unstable employment pattern than full-time work. Since it was married women who worked those shifts they were relatively more susceptible to layoff:

²⁸ Interview with H.G. (b.1926) (Worked at GEC 1940-44, 1953-84)

²⁹ Beechey V. Perkins T. *A Matter of Hours*, p22, and Longdale, S. in *Women and Poverty in Britain*, eds. Glendening, C. and Miller J. pp.103-105

"I was laid off at Helen St., I mean all us married women were. But I knew they would take us on again, they offered me a job at Stoke, but it was too far to travel. I was off a couple of months when they wrote and asked me back."

KATE: "How did you feel about being selected for lay off when after all it only affected married women."

"I thought that was fair, we had husbands to keep us whereas the single women didn't"

"Suppose your husband was unemployed or ill, how would you have felt."

"Well he wasn't so I don't know."³⁰

Clearly the OBC benefited during the period under review from full male employment and both the economic and ideological aspects of dependency. However, I want to stress that this respondent articulated an exceptional attitude to "lay off". Although, most women accepted both aspects of dependency, most would not agree that it should form the basis for discrimination. The following excerpt more accurately reflects attitudes.

"Well I mean why should we be the ones to pay after all we went to work for money because we needed it."³¹

This reflected a more common view.

The evidence I have summarised above suggests that the company laid off part-time workers in the 1950s and 60s and this met an ambivalent response; but it also suggests that such lay-offs were often selective and tempered with the possibility of transfer.³² Sometimes the company appeared to offer an alternative. Usually this meant working full-time, and perhaps a change of plant and this became increasingly the case during the 1970s. In a way the part-time shift constituted a pool of labour for the full-time shifts. This involved a selection process. Proven workers could be offered the choice of working full-time, and in a period of full employment and in the context of a multi-plant operation, other plants and shifts could absorb the best workers. The

³⁰ Interview with A.S. (Born 1925) (worked at OBC 1955-1957)

³¹ Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (worked at OBC 1952-1984)

³² See BCF Works Conference Minutes, 1954-60.

following account drawn from the 1970a recalled one of the ways it was done:

"It was the luck of the draw if they wanted to get rid of them, there was no union or anything. If there were two people sitting together, and the last one in would be the first one to leave. If they came and told the woman next to you she was out, then you knew your neck was saved for now, and there would be a sigh of relief. They would just come and touch you on the shoulder and you would finish. That's what they did when things got more desperate."³³

This suggests that the company's attitude had hardened by this time, for a decade previously women felt they had the choice of another job within the company. Indeed the shift of employers by the 1980a is confirmed by the trade union convenor who reflected that:

"Part-time shifts are a thing of the past. We can't have expensive technology lying about. I have always known that."³⁴

The most likely explanation for this recent development, according to discussions with the management, is that the GEC does not need to employ this category of labour in the context of current labour market conditions and the use of new technology. Change over the decades witnessed an erosion in the use of manual labour, especially with the introduction of new technology. Management in the later period was able to obtain sufficient quantities of labour on a full-time basis obviating the need for part-time workers during normal working. This has meant that the only part-time shifts now running are evening shifts in order to utilize machinery. The few remaining part-time day shifts at the Spon Street Plant at the time of interviewing the women in 1984 were organized on a more or less casual basis:

"You see women on part-time shifts are now employed temporarily on a week to week basis. This allows the company to escape any redundancy, or anything, and they can be told go at the drop of a hat."³⁵

³³ Interview with L.W. (b.1928) (Worked at GEC 1940a, 1950-84)

³⁴ Interview with L.B. (b.1929) (Worked at GEC 1953-57, 1957-present)

³⁵ Interview with L.W. (b.1928) (Worked at GEC 1940a, 1950-84)

This comment suggests that the long practice of organizing work on a part-time basis failed to establish it as a stable work pattern. In this case such arrangements have become less stable over time. In the post war years the company used part-time work as a substitute for full-time work, and many of the shifts were established on a less volatile basis, with the exception of the twilight shift which was always seen as a way of dealing with urgent and seasonal orders thus temporary. However by the 1980's the Spon Street plant, which was at this time awaiting closure, was organized on a temporary basis, while at the main works the only part-time workers were those employed on the twilight shift, to increase the utilization of new technology. Seen in this light part-time work has provided the flexibility the company needed to deal with specific labour and market conditions over a period of time.

Women's experiences of part-time work were ambivalent and reflect its contradictions. While part-time work provided women concerned with the kind of labour market opportunities that enabled some of them to meet their domestic responsibilities, it brought many into a harsh work regime. Looking at part-time work from an economic perspective the women concerned were often drawn into a wage structure that ensured unstable and less secure work patterns and lower wages. However, their experience as part-time workers showed the tensions in attempting to balance the demands between home and waged work, and for many this was accompanied by a sense of guilt when they felt they neglected domestic duties. It also revealed the frustration caused by the discrimination against part-time workers, who while being on the receiving end of the least favoured jobs also had the least security and low wages. In the next section I will examine the question of wages.

Wages Or Pin Money.

In this section I want to explore more fully women's perceptions of their wages. However before doing this I will attempt to give a brief indication of the company's attitude to women's wages. Some sense of the the company's policy is conveyed in this comment by the works manager:

"When the GEC was first established in Coventry, their perception was that many families had moved to the Midlands to the car industry. There was all this female labour there with a lot of time on their hands; not looking to earn a great deal of wages, but looking to earn a bit extra money; that dictated the company's motivation for female labour."¹

If this recollection is correct, then the assumption was that women, and particularly married women were not the main wage earners, that their motivation for working was not linked primarily to economic returns but more to filling in their time. Men were assumed to be the main breadwinners, and the motor industry was seen as providing this type of employment, while the GEC performed a service by employing otherwise idle women at low wage rates. Women were at most secondary earners, and some company personnel took this to be the women's view also:

"Well I think women were cheaper labour, more docile because the women regarded themselves as earning money to supplement the husband's wage, they regarded the job as an interlude between school and marriage."²

There are two underlying assumptions reflected in this comment. Firstly, the single woman's views of work was portrayed as short term, while married women worked to supplement the breadwinner's income, the real wage earner.³ Secondly, the assumption made about single women was they did not see themselves as independent wage earners, but saw work as a temporary interlude between school and marriage. So convinced was the respondent that this was the

¹ Interview with Works Manager (h. unknown) (Worked at GEC 1980s)

² Interview with supervisor (h. 1942) (Worked at GEC 1963-1974)

³ Such assumptions have, of course, been widely challenged, both analytically and empirically. For example, Pahl (1980) argues that married women contribute a greater proportion of their individual earnings to the upkeep of children, for instance, than do their spouses.

case that he went on to explain some of the reasons women took on part-time work:

There was a tradition in the 1950s and 1960s that a woman worked until she got married and then worked part-time. And I really believe there was a lot of status in being able to drop to working part-time because it was an announcement that your husband earned enough to keep you. You as a woman were there to pay for the three piece suite."⁴

This emphasizes that women were to be seen as voluntary dependents on the male wage. This perception was supposedly tied into the social status of married women where a smaller wage earned through part-time work confirmed the woman's position as dependent. The underlying assumption of all these comments, alluding to the whole period of the operation of GEC up to the end of the 1960s, was that women were comfortably dependent on male wages while their earnings represented the extras, saving in preparation for marriage or to purchase luxury consumer durables. This set of assumptions was only modified in relation to recent years, when, in the view of the current works manager, the collapse of the motor industry together with the introduction of the EPA, meant that women were now the major breadwinners in the local economy.

Having provided an outline indication of dominant management stereotypes I will now turn to a fuller discussion of how the women I interviewed viewed their wages. Firstly I will draw on my interview material to illustrate women's perceptions of the relationship between their level of earnings and their working hours and effort. Secondly, I will examine how women made sense of their wages, and how they spent them. Finally this will provide a basis for considering the relationship between their views and management perspectives. In developing this analysis I will give some attention to differences between age cohorts and between partnered women and lone parents.

As I have explained in a previous chapter the wage system was based on a PBR system and consisted of a basic rate and a bonus. The underlying feature characterizing this system was that it was supposed to be based on incentives as the bonus was assumed to reward effort. Despite

⁴ *ibid*

this none of the women I interviewed felt that the payment system reflected their work effort. The following comment is representative for all the women:

"Well they didn't see that we should be paid for our long experience or skills or the fact that we worked hard for them. But the wages did rise...there again especially in the war it was because we worked all the hours God sent and more, but to say they paid a decent bonus no. It had a reputation for low pay, that's why they employed us women."⁵

Other women placed a similar emphasis on low basic rates with overtime working improving the levels of wages. Indeed this respondent reported that in the late 1930s:

"I earned thirty shillings, I began work at 7.30 until 5.00. During the war we worked Saturday and Sunday and I did overtime in the evenings as well. Then it went up to about £3.50, I was brought up not to work on Sundays."⁶

Another commented:

"Oh, the wages there were always terrible. You were lucky if you came out with £1.50. I stayed for seventeen years and by the end of the 1940s I suppose it wasn't too bad, you see with Saturday overtime and work in the machine shop I got I suppose about £5.50 but that was for a sixty hour week."⁷

The argument that improved wages were the result of overtime and weekend work is consistent with the indications from Works Conferences and Trade Union Minutes, that the GEC allowed less scope than other local employers to earn bonuses. Concerning women workers at GEC Mr. Jones of the T&GWU argued:

"The average earnings over base rate are just slightly over 80% of the Women's National Schedule rates, which means that some women workers earned lower figures than that. Some women earn as low as 50% over the base rate. At 50% it would be 12s.6d bonus giving a total of 59s.6d for 47 hours..... Well Sir, it would not arise in such extremity probably.

⁵ Interview with L.P. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1938-50)

⁶ Interview with E.H. (b.1910) (Worked at GEC 1934-40, 1948-9, 1958-73)

⁷ Interview with Mrs D. (b.1920) (Worked at GEC 1940s)

if there was not this disparity. The need would be there, but we feel that the case is much stronger by reason of the general standard of earnings in the city. I suggest that one must take into account of the natural tendencies to dissatisfaction if these women feel that they are doing quite as essential and more intricate work than their fellow workers in other factories, and they are receiving half as much. The essential thing they have raised with us is the question of increased earnings based on need. For example, wages paid, approximately 1s.3d. to 1s.5d an hour less than the women would get if they went into quite a number of factories sweeping the floor."⁸

Although this comment refers to the war period, which was exceptional in that larger numbers of women were employed in the engineering industry, it nevertheless makes a number of crucial points about pay for women at the GEC. It clearly indicates some sense of the disparity between levels of pay for women at the GEC in contrast to other local engineering employers. This is underlined by the claim that, although the work the women did at GEC was equally as important as other work and more demanding, yet they received less than their potential earnings even compared with an unskilled job in other factories.⁹

The above evidence refers to the period up to the mid 1940s. By the 1950s evidence provided by the women indicate that from their experiences wages had not improved. One respondent, doing a nine to four o'clock shift, recalled that:

"I was in the wiring shop and I did the longest part-time shift they offered and I came out with around £2.00 to £3.00, so it wasn't a lot. I mean I can tell you I saw plenty of hungry days. By Thursday you had nothing left."¹⁰

Another reported similar rates for the more usual shorter shifts:

"Well I started at Helen Street in 1948, and the pay varied, but I got somewhere between £1.50 and £2.00, that was if you didn't pay your insurance stamp. And £2.00 was for about

⁸ Works Conference Minutes 17 September, 1943, 208 B TBN 2

⁹ (As I have explained earlier it was not possible for me to get figures because the data available was incomplete.)

¹⁰ Interview with L.A. (b1926) (GEC 1953-55)

twenty hours over, it was an afternoon shift. That was supposed to be a bonus on press and capstan work.¹¹

According to the women the wages in the women's section like the wiring shops were particularly low, and this may be related to the limitations on bonus earning, as the Bonus Charts shows that similar effort was less well rewarded in the Wiring Shop as compared to the Machine Shop.¹²

These accounts merely convey some sense of the level of female wages at the the GBC. I will now explore how far their wages covered what these women perceived to be their needs, starting with the recollections of the 1930s and 1940s. Talking about the 1930s one respondent explained:

"Well my wages went on the household, we furnished two rooms, nothing too grand. I mean I didn't go in for all the mod cons. My husband gave me a wage as well, but he liked to pay all the household bills. In fact he was very mean which is why I had to stay in work, and he knew that I was under him anyway, and going to work gave me that little bit of space, and I used to insist we had holidays, and he couldn't complain when I bought things I wanted.... I did want a new stove, and he wouldn't let me have one, well after ages I got one, you see I had some money. But he thought he was lord and master."¹³

Two important themes emerge in this comment, the notion of necessities and the notion of autonomy. Firstly, there is an emphasis on necessities which for this respondent meant very basic requirements, but included holidays. Although the spouse emphasised his role as breadwinner the respondent still regarded her wage as a major contribution to the household economy, giving her leverage to improve living standards. Intertwined with this was a sense of gaining "space".

¹¹ Interview with M.B. (b.1925) (GBC 1948-1955)

¹² There is evidence that this trend appears to have been carried on into the 1960s and the 1970s. Firstly in a discussion with a supervisor who was employed by the company during this period I was informed that all wiring work particularly done at a single bench had lower status, in contrast to work in mechanical sections, and work on inspection which had higher status and more money. In discussions with members of the younger cohort I was told that wages in the 1960's in the wiring sections varied between £7.00 and £9.00 for a full week depending on overtime and the quality of the work, whereas work in the machine shop varied from £10.00 to £12.00 for a full week.

¹³ Interview with W.M. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1933-36, 1941-43, 1955-66)

involved gaining or protecting a sense of independence. These themes were highlighted in the comments of other women too. When compared with the management stereotype, which assumed that the women concerned went to work to occupy otherwise idle time while materially being interested in obtaining luxury consumer durables; their comments suggest that these women had more compelling reasons seeking a wage, to do with basic necessities as well as developing a sense of autonomy.

Another respondent recalling her life in the early 1940s explained the importance of her earnings in a somewhat different context which highlighted another implication of 'women's wages':

"Soon after we got married my husband became paralysed, and he couldn't work. All we could do on my wages was to barely live, I paid the rent, my daughter went to the nursery, and that was free. I would have liked to have bought a fridge, Hoover, and washing machine, but it was all beyond me at the time. We couldn't save, we never had a holiday, and we couldn't get back on our feet after that. Things were very difficult. When we wanted to buy clothes we got a cheque from the Co-Op and paid it back so much per week. But I got something like three pounds a week, and then there was a shortage of work and we were laid off."¹⁴

Unlike the previous respondent this woman found herself, through her spouse's illness, in the position of sole breadwinner. In this case only the barest necessities could be exchanged for the wage she received and even with the help of a free nursery place the female wage had little elasticity. This comment brings out another initial implication of the company's attitude to women's earnings namely that women in such a situation would face very difficult circumstances, giving a particular sharpness to the very strongly held view of the GEC as a "low waged employer."

¹⁴ Interview with Mrs. Rich. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1940s 1950s)

A further important theme running through both the above comments refers to a sense of changing expectations about living standards and consumption. In her discussion of the expansion of women's employment post war Gluckman (1986) argues that such a change paralleled the commoditization of domestic appliances,¹⁵ though she makes the point that while working class women made products like fridges and electric cleaners, the beneficiaries were the middle class. However these comments serve to show that working women in the 1940s would have liked to acquire these products too, even when they were wary of the ties of this involvement:

"I can tell you some people got themselves into some fair old messes. They would see a vacancy at Spon St. and would be off down for a job, and hey presto they would be off buying all the mod cons, on hire purchase of course, and then there wouldn't be any more work and they would be crying to the foreman. They would not know how to pay."¹⁶

Women saw the new domestic products as a means to improved living standards and thus aspired to own them. Many of the women I interviewed had expected that their wage, when combined with that of their spouse, would allow them to purchase new products: their independent wages were in this sense seen as the means to improve living standards.

As the above comment suggested, this was sometimes done on the basis of credit. The implication of this was that women needed a stable and regular income to meet this new responsibility, though at the same time the conditions of their employment did not guarantee this. This comment also says a lot about some of the attitudes to these changed ideas about life styles and living standards. It suggests something of a mild critique of such aspirations, compared with the philosophy of making ends meet characteristic of the 1930s, and as such is more representative of the older women than of the younger.

Women's sometimes contradictory rationalisation of waged work gave way in the end to its acceptance:

¹⁵ Cowm, R. S. in *The Social Shaping Of New Technology*, eds Mackenzie, D. and Wajcman, J.

¹⁶ Interview with W.M. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1933-36, 1941-43, 1955-1966)

"Well you see the money wasn't wonderful but they always had a job for you, and had time for you. And if we didn't have that job where would we be. There was no help. And it gave you that bit of space at home."¹⁷

This depicts a sentiment shared by many of the women who had experiences of work at GEC in the 1930s and the 1940s. Inadequate wages were recognized as such, but nevertheless valued, both in relieving and in mitigating problems in the home.

I will now turn to the 1950s and seek to identify any change in the perceptions of necessities, attitudes to wages and to the employer in this period. I will also give some attention to any differences between partnered and lone women. A characteristic comment from this period was:

"Well we wanted to buy a house, and have a bit of security behind you, and why shouldn't working people have that too, we have worked all our lives, I mean my parents grew up and never left the tenements of G....., we didn't want that for our children, so the option was work, work...We earned the money, I paid the mortgage, the rates, I taxed the car, I arranged to buy the furniture, well we couldn't do it if I didn't work, and there again if anything happened to R..., well my wages from work wouldn't do, so you see it's a partnership."¹⁸

This suggests how change in the perceptions of living standards transformed the meaning of necessities. House purchase as an alternative to renting had in some areas become an established aspect of post war consumerism.¹⁹ In the experience of this respondent this could not be achieved without a joint income, making her independent wage crucial to this goal. However, partnered women could not take this pattern for granted:

"I have always worked because I have to. It was financially necessary. My husband worked in the motor industry and they were more out of work than in. There was short time working, and of course, there were the strikes. Finally of course they achieved nothing,

¹⁷ Interview with E.D. (b.1917) (Worked at GEC 1940s-1960s)

¹⁸ Interview with M.G. (b.1926) (Worked at GEC 1950, 1960-1984)

¹⁹ Goldthorpe, J. and Lockwood, D. *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*.

because once they got a decent wage the government set out to destroy our car industry. And there again we never got big wages, and if we weren't prepared to change with the work, then we too would have been out."²⁰

This respondent, then, introduces a fresh twist to the discussion in arguing that women were not just working to improve living standards, but also working to offset the insecurity characteristic of the male labour market. While spouses struggled for a better wages, women's wages tended to stabilize the family income in times of crisis.

Similar sentiment was expressed by other women, who also underlined the positive value they placed on a relatively secure wage alongside the uncertainties of the male labour market, while at the same time emphasising both the constraints on their job choice and the low level of wages. They preferred not to rely completely on the male wage, and the following extract outlines one of several reasons:

"Having a husband who never told me how much he earned, nor for that matter, neither did I tell him what I got. My money gave me great independence. I went out and got what I wanted. That is what I miss most about working. It gave me the power to buy things. I could always get the children's needs, and have a better life, that's the best thing out of work."²¹

Another respondent throws further light on some of the problems associated with the male wage:

"I... worked in the motor industry, there were times when they were more out than in, and that didn't help. So you got to hang on in there at work"²²

While the next respondent elaborated on the interplay moves within the male labour market and the meeting of family commitments:

²⁰ Interview with L.W. (b.1928) (GBC 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s)

²¹ Interview with Mrs.G. (b.1922) (Worked at GBC 1951-2, 1955-8, 1962-83)

²² Interview with M.A. (b.1915) (Worked at GBC 1953-55)

"When we first came down from Wales my husband got a job in the Rudge, and he never earned good wages, the jobs were no good. They were sacked from that when the place closed down. Much later in the later 1950s he became a foreman in the Gauge and Tool. That was secure work, but very poorly paid. I had to be in work, and I could only find suitable hours at GEC, and they were willing to employ us, they never appreciated us, nor paid us for what we done, but there again, it was better than no job at all. I mean we're the ones who has to shop and feed everybody." -23

Against this background the inadequacy of the female wage was revealed when the joint income arrangement fell apart:

"By this time I had separated from my husband and had three small children, a mortgage, and all the bills, I had to learn how to survive. I mean on the nine to four shift you always expected to be told to go, that was how it was. Well you see the GEC was very badly run, inefficient I mean you had to learn to survive there. There wouldn't be any work. I was assembling frames, and we would run short of components, you know simple things. The floors were littered with nuts and bolts, things we wanted. There wasn't a labourer to sweep up and no one swept up. Anyway I could see we were going to be laid off, so one of the things I did was to regularly sweep up and keep the material as reserve in the case of a shortage. Now my friend said to me don't do it, but you see it kept us in work. Out of my wages I paid the regular weekly bills like the mortgage, childminding and food, now we are not talking of expenses like gas, fuel and clothing, and I was still better off than when I was married, because for one thing I was in control of my money. But on three pounds for a full week I ask was it all worth it, and I have to say no" -24

This extract makes a number of important points. Firstly it shows that such women, faced with the responsibility of the family upkeep, were hardly in an improved financial situation in the 1950s. It was during this period that Coventry gained a reputation as a high wage labour

²³ Interview with H.G. (b.1917) (Worked at GEC from 1940s-1978)

²⁴ Interview with L.A. (b.1926) (GEC 1953-1955)

market, but we must remember that women were excluded from high earnings. Secondly while the respondent recognized the extent to which she was a low paid worker she still felt that such wages were an improvement on her previous situation as a dependent wife.

Now I will turn to the 1960s and to the younger cohort and I will compare and contrast their perceptions with those of the older women. The theme that women worked from necessity remained central:

"Money was and will always be the prime motive. My husband was on short time working. I was faced with having to find a job. Anyway as the wife of a semi-skilled manual worker he did not earn a lot. My husband was from time to time on short time also. Sometimes it was just two days a week so where would we be without my wage."²⁵

Thus, again, in the 1960s attention was drawn to the volatility in the male labour market, and also to the limitations of the male wage. Moreover the opportunity to make an economic contribution to the family welfare gave women a sense of purpose. Some women felt the experience of work outside the home gave them an enhanced sense of self worth:

"Well, I think my money helped to keep poverty from the door, that meant less misery, more happiness. And as well as the money, it keeps your brain happy. You have more confidence, you feel more powerful. You can go out and buy a dress if you want and you don't have to explain it to your husband. We have many modern things in our home today a washing machine, automatic freezer, stereo and new furniture. You see these were possible because of our joint effort. We achieved a better standard of living. And of course, going out to work helps you with your appearance. You stay younger. I mean you have the opportunity to mix with young people, younger women, and to enjoy the new styles. Although you don't exactly wear the same thing it influences you, and you enjoy the company."²⁶

²⁵ Interview with L.S. (b.1924) (GBC 1955-57-1957-1980s)

²⁶ Interview with M.G. (b.1927) (Worked at GBC 1950s-84)

Another commented:

"Well you see having a bit of own money was good, I mean I didn't have to go and ask the old man for the money when I wanted to go to the hairdressers, or buy a pair of tights, neither could he complain when there was better food on the table, or that we went on holidays, or that I could go out and buy the children shoes, you see no matter what the old man earns, that's what's important having something you got yourself."²⁷

So far in my discussion I have highlighted as a consistent theme the ways in which women's wages at the GEC, though low, were seen as a crucial element of the family or household economy, as well as affording women a sense of space or independence. I have also indicated that their perception of their wage was reinforced by the widespread awareness of the limitations of the male wage, not only in circumstances of single parenthood, but also for couples. Sometimes such features were highlighted by family experience:

"Well my Mum never knew how much Dad earned, nor if and when she would get some money. My Mum's generation didn't ask, and if they did they were likely to get a thump around the ear. If my Mum didn't work when we were kids we would have starved. My father just did not come home with the money, he went to the pub. So that's the wrong attitude to think a woman's wage is supplementary, anyway what about one-parent families. I would never totally rely on a man to keep me, well you are trapped then waiting for his money"²⁸

Clearly this woman learned the importance of financial independence through family experience and particularly from her mother. At the same time such a critique of the notion of pin money was also grounded in direct experience of employment relations. This is suggested by its place in a more explicit challenge to claims and perspectives of GEC management:

"They said a great deal, and done very little. Well you see the GEC made enormous profits at the expense of us girls. And although it was like *home from home*, and we enjoyed

²⁷ Interview with B.C. (b.1948) (Worked GEC 1962-72)

²⁸ Interview with W.G. (b.1944) (Worked at GEC 1963-78)

ourselves, at the same time, they were taking advantage of us. Of course we fought back, and maybe things did get better."²⁹

Furthermore, such recollections of engagement in shop-floor activity could on occasion be accompanied by a sharp conception of exploitation and also contestation, as in the reflection of one long serving GBC worker:

"When I worked on the track at the Spon St. Works, we used to say, I never knew a place where you worked so damned hard for so little. A little Scottish girl coined the phrase. Anyway, we had a lot of fun. There were good times and bad times, but you made the most of it. You see I had a regular job with proper money, low maybe, but at least regular. And there again we did a good job for the company"³⁰

As the previous comment implies, the accommodation of these women to their family and labour market circumstances should not be taken to mean that they were either docile or content. Firstly, there was a clear eyed recognition that the work was hard while the pay was low, features which were counteracted by patterns of coping and accommodation similar to those reported in a wide spectrum of other studies of shop floor work.³¹ These features are nicely captured by the comment that:

"They say a lot of women do it for pin money, well not me. The reason I worked was undoubtedly to achieve a better standard of living, but I also wanted some independence, I mean I didn't want to ask my husband for everything. I wanted to earn money of my own, but that did not mean we didn't share. After I married I always tried to have a job. Because of that I was forced to work in terrible places for terrible money, all slave labour, no unions. When they interviewed me at the GBC they attempted to tell me it is something special, but

²⁹ Interview with R.B. (b.1922) (GBC 1947-1951 1952-1975)

³⁰ Interview with R.H. (b.1943) (Worked at GBC 1965-68)

³¹ Trivializing alienating work conditions helped workers to endure the experience. Similarly other studies show how workers, both male and female, rationalise unpleasant and subordinate forms of work. (Westwood 1984, Pollert 1981, Willis 1977) What these studies show that despite (but in part through) of gender differences, all workers sought out strategies which helped make sense of their experiences of alienating work.

It wasn't, I was asked why I wanted to work and I said I wanted to earn money. And of course we had skills, they didn't pay us for that, and anyway we never thought they would."³²

The reality for the women was that, although they fully acknowledged they were low paid workers, they contested that they worked for "pin money." Rather they worked for a low wage in relatively subordinate conditions, which outside the workplace secured them an improved standard of living and a hint of autonomy in the home. My material is therefore consistent with the interpretation offered by analysts of the "family wage" in that they challenge the stereotypical notion of the male breadwinner.³³

Furthermore, my material is consistent with the work of Pahl who examines a different dimension of the family wage and its relevance in the household. She argues that rather than men being the major breadwinners, women spent a greater proportion of their wages directly on household expenditure. So although the male wage may be larger, men tend to spend proportionately less of their overall wages on the household. In contrast to the management stereotype the women I interviewed certainly argued that they worked out of necessity, the purpose of work being to improve their families' living standards. Women too like men feel they have an economic role in the family.³⁴ While the women in this study generally expected an economic contribution from male partners, this did not preclude a similar contribution from them.

³² Interview with W.G. (b.1944) (Worked at GBC 1961-72)

³³ The materiality of the family wage is challenged by both Lund (1980) and Barrett and McIntosh (1980). The main ramifications of the notion are that it marginalises women materially in the labour market relegating them to the secondary sector; it enforces dependency in the private sphere which has the effect of legitimising low pay structures for women in the public sphere; it does not necessarily guarantee an increase in the value of the male wage; and it causes a division in the working class expressed in gender. It has also saliency as an ideology in the public sphere, and can be utilised by employers to depress female wages and may be explicitly advocated, or tacitly accepted by the labour movement (as in their ambivalence to tackle the question of equal pay) while at the same time, it acts to cloud women's consciousness. The family wage has done very little to assuage female poverty if the evidence of recent research is any indication. Studies of women and poverty argue that relative to men, they continue to be the victims, in spite of the era of optimism characterizing the post war decades. (See *Women And Poverty*, edited by B. Gupta et al (1987), and *Women and Poverty in Britain* (1987) Glendonning, C., Millar, J., particularly the first two chapters.

³⁴ This point is made by A. Pataczkies (1982) in her discussion of West Indian women's attitude to motherhood.

In this chapter I have focused on the wage side of the wage labour relationship, experienced by women workers at GEC. In later chapters I will focus more directly on the organization and experience of the labour involved, examining some of the characteristic features of management policies in their organization and administration of work and the ways in which women interpreted, coped with, and on occasion contested, their experiences of wage labour. For now I want to end the discussion in this chapter by noting the gloss placed on these comments by some management representatives:

"Well the company made only a gesture, never a reality acknowledging that women had a skill; because you see from own experience there was a very big difference in wage rates between men and women. Men earned a lot more. Of course the company paid a lot of lip service to women's skills but they never intended to reward women. I mean look at job promotion, it was non-existent for women, women were not at all encouraged to compete for better paying jobs. And I'm not saying what women did was not important, for they were the key workers, but all it meant was lousy pay. I can't remember the rates."³⁵

While this comment has been drawn from a discussion with a long serving personnel manager responsible for manual workers, its sentiments were supported by both a work manager with an equally long service covering the same period, and a supervisor with less, but with equally important experience in the wiring sections of a particular plant during the 1960s and the 1970s. From the company's perspective then, female wage rates were not at all intended to reward effort, worth or skill, and while ostensibly expressing appreciation for the women concerned, did not in practice provide the means for them to earn better wages.

³⁵ Interview with Retired Personnel Manager (b.1923) (Worked at GEC 1937-84)

CHAPTER FIVE

Culture and Femininity in the Workplace.

An important feature of some recent ethnographies of women at work has been their recognition of the significance and centrality of the workplace celebration of the reproductive aspects of femininity. This aspect too was a prominent feature of workplace culture at GEC. The celebration of femininity within the workplace has sometimes been understood as both collaboration and opposition to workplace constraints. (Pollert, 1981, Westwood 1984) While this complex phenomenon has been largely attributed to the responses of female workers in mediating and in coping with the more oppressive nature of workplace practices, I would like to explore the extent it may also be part of employer strategy in managing women workers. In developing this analysis I do not seek to undermine its importance as a female worker activity, but to illustrate neglected aspects of the construction of femininity in the workplace.

In order to explore this question further using interview data from management personnel, the women concerned and the Loudspeaker, I want to focus on the notion of a 'woman's factory' and to outline some of the ways in which management in particular promoted a distinctive gendered view of work. There are two important strands to this argument. The first of these is that the company at least colluded with the consolidation of a distinctive female culture in the workplace. This culture was characterised by the celebration of domesticity, and reproduction, particularly through activities connected with the themes of sexuality marriage and child birth. The second strand of my argument is that this culture was drawn on in the construction of a gendered job structure, not least in the manner in which work based skills were constructed as dexterities.

Discussions with the management and a survey of evidence suggests that many of the jobs at GEC were clearly sex typed. In this chapter I want to tentatively outline some of the features involved in this stereotyping. In particular I want to suggest that aspects of women's domestic or private roles, such as sexuality or domestic dexterities, were drawn on (and even emphasised) to identify certain work as women's work. Women were employed in most of the manual jobs on

the shop floor - these included wiring, soldering some types of inspection, and operating the more manual machines in the mechanical sections - and they also did some supervision. The tendency to link women to particular jobs was most obvious in the more labour intensive work such as jobs in assembly and some of the work in the machine shop sections. Nevertheless this division of labour was very complex, for as I will try to show throughout the forthcoming chapters, although the women concerned were (according to management's perspective) employed for their assumed dexterities, the intricacies and the complexities of the work called for other competences too, like some degree of technical skill, the efficient use of small hand tools in the assembly sections, and the use of measuring gauges in inspection. A second complication was that despite such stereotyping, women were sometimes employed on male jobs, such as operating larger machines when necessary.

In summary I wish to argue that the image of the GEC as a "woman's factory" was at least partly based on the existence of a distinctive, gendered workplace culture. Furthermore the centrality and the persistent renewal of this culture involved not only the active participation of the women workers themselves, but also a variety of direct or permissive management policies and practices; though this did not mean that there was any simple consensus between management and workers over identities celebrated in this culture. Finally, I wish to highlight how the notion of a 'woman's factory', and some of the themes and identities associated with this shop floor culture, were implicated in the construction and interpretation of the internal job structure at GEC.

I will begin by examining some of ways femininity had an impact on workplace relations. A useful starting point is to consider the way in which management saw the salience of gender. In an interview with a former supervisor I was told:

"I would say that the women in the factory were regarded as separate people altogether. There was a different culture for men, there was fierce competition, a rat race between the men, they worked hard, competed with each other, they fought for promotion; they worked for promotion. Men competed and saw themselves being promoted, there was somewhere for them to go, whereas there was a lower.... well the women's world was completely

separate, all they could hope for was being promoted to the level of chargehand which was called a key girl. To a certain extent the GEC was typical of women's employment anywhere. Women were expected to concentrate on their lives outside the factory although they were allowed to make this a social life within it. Women workers were not involved in the company in the way male workers were. And of course male workers were committed in a way that women were not.¹

This is an important comment for it throws light on the way the company saw its workers. The view articulated by this supervisor was typical of management perspectives on women workers. The comment challenges any view that the employer is gender blind; rather management were very aware of gender, and this influenced management's perceptions of worker behaviour, commitment and expectations. Male and female workers were viewed very differently, not least in terms of work orientation and goals. In this sense men were assumed to be competitive, geared to promotion, and committed to company goals, and by contrast women were perceived to be uncompetitive, prioritizing their personal lives and domesticity over work. Such assumptions were consistent with a job structure characterized by little hierarchy, and encouraged among women employees a workplace culture linked to domesticity. Some former management personnel assumed that many of the female employees saw the workplace primarily as the route to marriage:

"Well of course a lot of women didn't take work seriously, it was a way to marriage. There was an unspoken assumption that the company was a sort of marriage brokerage centre, and in view of the number of people who got married within the firm, I think that was significant. The GEC kept St Michael's church in Stoke in business."²

Not only were female workers assumed to see work as a way of finding a marriage partner, and to prioritize their personal lives, but this perception of the female worker was one the company fostered. For instance, while women workers were involved in the celebration of the

¹ Interview with Mr.B. (b.1942) (Worked at GEC 1963-1977)

² Ibid

ritualization of womanhood from engagements to marriage to child birth, the company actively encouraged this:

"Women when I was at OEC were encouraged in a way to see their work as a social activity, and were certainly discouraged as seeing themselves in competition to get promotion or anything. This is very much epitomized in what is reported in *The Loudspeaker*, the company house journal, and the way women were pictured there, in which a woman had three high points in her life associated with her life outside work; starting with a splendid shindig for her wedding, there were certain rituals about all that, like sewing flowers on the bride's coat and so, and then being chased out of the wiring shop. The second high point was again her departure for the first pregnancy which again meant another wonderful send off. And then if her husband was earning enough for her not to work, there was again a marvellous goodbye, or as I said before to work part-time meant she could enjoy being a mother and housewife."³

This extract suggests that the management and the company linked the job structure with women's social and economic status, as well as their life cycle. From management's perspective women's work was seen as an interlude before marriage and childcare, when women either left, or became part-time workers. Either way the process was seen as the confirmation of a particular social and economic status, as a 'married woman', when domesticity was assumed to become a central feature of their lives.

Femininity and Its Rites of Passage in the Workplace

In my discussion with the women they conveyed the sense of an unwritten assumption that issues affecting their personal lives played a crucial role in the everyday culture, custom and practice of the workplace. The women graphically recall the salience of their friendships and personal social life in their experiences of work. A representative comment from one of the younger women was:

"I stayed in Dunlop six weeks, and I worked in British Celanese no longer than five months, well that was how it was, you walked out of one job today into another job tomorrow, and it was then that I went to the GEC. That was in 1962. I went into the Wiring Shop. I met a lot of young people all my own age, boys and girls. Well in the 1960's there was a lot going on, groups playing, new kinds of clothes, makeup and we danced to records. We went ten pin bowling and dancing. There were the weekends, the birthdays, it was hilarious, I loved that side of work. In the dinner hour we danced to records in the company ball-room"⁴

The characteristic emphasis on leisure was quite different from the discussion of work by older women, but since this was a retrospective account by a woman in her thirties it seems likely that it was a core feature for her generation. Other members of this age group relate similar experiences:

"There was of course emphasis on quality and quantity and they were very strict, and you couldn't stand about and gossip well or leave my job and wander off and have a gossip. But it could be done. Well you would pick up your drawing with you and outwardly give the impression that you were discussing some aspects of the job by pointing to it, meanwhile you say Oh Jenny, what a fantastic time I had on Saturday. I met this really great bloke. That kind of thing, stolen moments really. My first job was at GEC. I mean women just went there. There were lots of young people there at the time about my own age. And there

⁴ Interview with S.O. (b.1945) (Worked at GEC 1961-1974)

was always something to look forward to. It was wonderful, I mean we had dancing in the ballroom at dinner time. We were all very close and we went out in the evenings and at weekends. You just lived for that. There were birthdays and 'hen parties' and outings to Blackpool."⁵

This comment shows that the company encouraged the younger workers to indulge in their leisure activities during recreation periods. Another feature of this comment is the way it counterposes some of the aspects of social interaction about personal lives to the constraints of the work, as a slightly subversive way of coping with the alienating features of work discipline. Another feature is the central significance of the theme of enjoyment of leisure time. The characteristic emphasis on leisure may be related to the culture of youth and its emphasis on enjoyment which appear only to have assumed this form in the late 1950's and early 1960's.⁶

For both of the women I have just quoted the importance of the social networks and activities which germinated out of the work environment seems more salient than the experience of work itself. The specific social activities and conditions of the period helped these women to 'rise above' the reality of work, to make this form of escapism feasible. Nevertheless, the term 'escapism' conceals complexity, for we must not lose sight of the fact that the women continued to face the realities of increasingly alienating work.⁷

As other studies have noted (particularly Westwood, 1984) such an emphasis on women's personal lives was reflected in the celebration of engagements and marriage, when during working hours a party was held and gifts presented to the future bride. On such occasions the company also participated, by presenting a gift:

"Well as I said they had their parties at work with everybody there, there were engagement parties, 'hen parties' leaving parties, and the baby table party. Oh yes all that went on. And yes some kind of gift was often presented to the girl by the super, or whoever."

⁵ Interview with B.C. (b.1948) (Worked at GBC 1964-1970s)

⁶ See for example the discussion Frith, S. in *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock*. Chap. 8, esp. pp182-189.

⁷ See chapters six, seven and eight for a fuller discussion.

Kate: "How did the company respond to this, was it not inefficient."

"Well yes and no. Everybody came to the presentation of the gift, the superintendent and all. That's how it was."⁸

Such celebrations were also a feature of the recollections of the women:

"Well you see we began our Hen Parties at work. It was the day all the presents were brought into work. The particular section would organize a "Bride Table" comprised of the kind of gifts suited to a new bride. Tea services, blankets, sheets and so on were purchased and presented by the girls. There would be a visit to the pub at lunchtime, and bottles of wine taken into work. This was not allowed, but nobody said anything."

While another respondent talked about the effect this had on production on such occasions:

"Well you see I didn't think work was taken that seriously. Things were uncontrollable that afternoon. I mean we had bottles of wine. We were singing and if someone of the management came around and said something there was so much screeching, shouting and yelling. It was in some ways embarrassing. No work was done."⁹

This aspect of the celebration of the rites of passage of womanhood challenged management immediate interests, in the sense that production was halted, but it would seem that on such occasion the management response was usually muted.

Meanwhile other comments suggests that for the woman explains the revelry was merely in preparation for the evening adventure:

"At the end of the working day the bride was prepared for home. She was given an enormous paper hat covered in paper flowers to wear together with a coat dressed in the most lurid expressions. Usually a relative or boyfriend chauffeured the future bride home amid a rowdy send off. However the evening celebrations were only beginning. Usually the section arranged to meet for a pub crawl and then a visit to a night club."¹⁰

⁸ Interview with Mir.B (b.1942) (Worked at GBC 1963-1977)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Interview with B.H. (B.1943) (Worked at GBC 1965-1968)

¹¹ Interview with W.G (b.1944) (Worked at GBC 1961-1972)

Other women too had similar recollections:

"It was my friend Jane's Hen Party. Her Dad was strict, I'm sure it was supposed to be permissive in those days but it wasn't really. Anyway she had to be "in". Well we met at seven o'clock, of course after the earlier episode at work. There were about ten of us altogether. We went into about six different pubs, the usual ones around town. We had drinks in each one. As the evening progressed we became louder and less steady on our feet. By ten o'clock we were well away, and then we set off for the night club. Hen parties were welcomed. We got in a bit cheaper having negotiated a deal with the Bouncer on the door. Then we selected a table to establish ourselves and our presence, brought drinks and then proceeded onto the dance floor. It was common then for girls to dance together in a big circle placing our handbags in an inner circle. So we danced around our handbags. We were chased up by men and had a really raucous time. However, on such occasions there were casualties. Some had several drinks, or was sick, so sick in fact that it became necessary for us to telephone Jane's father to take her home. And that caused a furore. I mean our reputations suffered a rapid decline and had to be carefully rescued. But they were marvellous times".¹¹

Such a celebration of this stage in the transition to womanhood grew out of social networks made in the workplace, and was loudly proclaimed in the most public manner possible both in the workplace and outside it.

Likewise a second and crucial aspect of femininity was equally celebrated in the workplace. Impending child birth was given as much prominence, and women frequently recalled this experience:

"Well what I loved most was the Baby Tables, in my time when I was having mine in the 1930s we never did that kind of thing, but when I worked there last time the young ones were into all that. It was wonderful the friendship. Well you see we'd have a 'kitty' and

¹¹ Interviews with R.H. (b.1943) (Worked at GBC 1963-68) and R.C. (b.1948) (Worked at GBC 1964-1970s)

collect up as much as we could get, we go off and get from the management too, and our foreman used to say, 'I know what she has been up to', but he always gave, and then we'd go off into town, and do a shop, we'd get everything, you know its hard when you have a young baby you spend more and you have less money. On the day she was to leave we'd decorate the table and have a party. Yes I loved it and you see it helped.¹²

This activity then must be understood as an expression of friendship and solidarity based on the common experiences of child birth for women. It was also a form of material support, a contribution towards the extra costs incurred at a crisis point a woman's life, for the transition from being a full time waged worker to an unwaged housewife with the additional responsibilities was clearly recognized as a difficult experience:

"Well we bought everything you can think of that a baby might need. We knitted the usual sets of booties and bonnets, and shawls. We bought the nappies, the clothes the baby bath set. You see it is a big shock when you leave work and lose your own wages and at the same time you have a baby who constantly needs new things. You see it is at this point that women go without themselves".¹³

In some respects these accounts suggest a convergence between the autonomous initiatives of women workers and aspects of management involvement in the construction of femininity in the form of married women with domestic responsibilities. At the same time these reflections are in important respects at odds with the themes I have identified earlier in management views of the woman worker, for they show that women were very concerned with the loss of individual earnings.

Another way in which family and domestic themes entered into the workplace was in terms of the domestication of the work environment:

"I spent most of my life at work, so really we lived at work, and I think it was important to make it feel like home. We brought in calendars, plants, photos of the children and

¹² Interview with E.H. (b.1910) (Worked at GBC 1934-40, 1948-49, 1958-73)

¹³ Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at GBC 1952-1964)

grandchildren, and the younger ones brought in posters. That was up in Stoke, oh yes, we felt it was in some ways like home."¹⁴

The stark surroundings of the factory were adorned by personal possessions, features of the "home". Other women recall this practice:

"Well it was home from home, we had our photos and so on, and we had a laugh"¹⁵

Thus the women workers were allowed to humanise the workplace just as women do inside the "home". Such reminiscences underline the significance of such a pattern of activity of the working environment, and the centrality of the family, domesticity, and homeliness in this process. They also offer little indication of any tension between the worker and management practices in this regard, although there is a hint of such a tension in respects of the more "commercial" elaborations of domestic economy which developed on the shop floor.

Household catalogues and clubs and various other marketing techniques flourished within the workplace. According to one respondent, sections were almost transformed into mini markets on Friday afternoons:

"I mean people used to bring in things to sell. Each one had her own line of selling. There was sheets, pillows, tights, women's clothes, baby clothes. Every other person had something to sell. It was a wonder we ever did anything. I don't know how we got away with it, but management seemed to turn a blind eye".¹⁶

By the 1960s this was a well established pattern of workplace activity, one which was organized by women for women within the context of their wider role in society. It was endorsed in custom and practice terms by management but clearly encroached on working time. As with the baby tables discussed above, it appears that such practices grew and became fully established during the post-war boom, during a period of relative labour scarcity.

¹⁴ Interview with N.B. (b.1917) (Worked at GBC 1932-1977)

¹⁵ Interviews with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at GBC 1952-1984)

¹⁶ Interview with R.H. (b.1943) (Worked at GBC 1965-1968)

Such examples pose the question of the significance of these aspects of feminine culture in the workplace. The 'domestication' of the workplace both in terms of moments and mini-markets clearly demonstrates the active role of the women at GEC in constructing aspects of their experience. Indeed these features, together with the celebrations of 'rites of passage' constitute forms of self assertion which challenge the stereotypical image of the passive and the private woman. Furthermore there is clear evidence of some discord between the perspectives of management and these women workers, both in the latter's appreciation of the practical exigencies of birth and child care, and in the occupation of physical and psychological space against the routine pressures and disciplines of the workplace.

Nevertheless, on this evidence at least, such dissonance left the general structure of management assumptions and stereotypes untouched, and was in a large part invisible to them. Furthermore the practices of domestication and celebration of rites of passage were generally tolerated and absorbed by 'understanding management', not least because they did little to subvert management control or the production of work.

I now want to comment in a brief and exploratory way on several aspects of the manner some in which management appeared to appropriate in a selective fashion some of the themes involved in this workplace culture of femininity and the domestication of working time. Firstly I wish to register the impression gained from my interviews with managers, that for such men the motifs of family, dependency, domesticity and sexuality tended to dominate in their perspectives on women workers, to the virtual exclusion of any overt recognition of the significance of the cash nexus for these women. (Possibly this might even help to explain the difficulty I encountered in gaining detailed records or information about the history of wage rates for women). This underplaying of women's economic interests, coupled with an emphasis on family commitments, domesticity and dependency, can be seen in several of the management commentaries which I have quoted earlier(90-92) and another example is provided by the following rather elaborate account of the logic of women's work and family involvements:

"Well you see the women were stuck at GEC. Where could they move to. I mean B.T.H. and the A.E.I. in the old days did the same sort of work. But eventually GEC took both those places over. So all in all there was little opportunity nor inclination to move elsewhere, because the social life associated with work, and the network with the job and the opportunity as work to get social status through marriage and then becoming a part-time worker was important."¹⁷

Apart from the underlying depreciation of any powerful economic rationale for women's waged work, another key feature of such management perspectives is the interweaving of familial, domestic and feminine referents in any discussion of the work women actually do. Such an interweaving may take diverse forms, as is illustrated by the following repertoire of characteristics drawn from the Loudspeaker. Firstly, a frequent motif is the combination and cross-cutting of discussions of work competence and domestic involvements, as in the following comment:

"Typical of the many smiling faces is that of Mrs Roberts who during her six years here has become an expert in wiring and soldering. She loves her work, and is always ready to tackle any difficult job that comes along. She is even more happy for recently she and her husband moved to a house after waiting for five years."¹⁸

Sometimes the familial referents appear to fuse together domestic familialism and the firm as a happy family, in ways which follow some contours of familialism discussed by Barrett and Mactonish,¹⁹ as in the next comment:

"Mrs O'Leary has always worked in the same department, and one of her daughters Mrs Copeland has fifteen years service to her credit works with her. In fact, the GEC is very much a family concern to the O'Leary's. Her husband was in the finishing shop for some years until he died four years ago."²⁰

¹⁷ Interview with Mr. B. (b.1942) (Worked at GEC 1963-1974)

¹⁸ *The Loudspeaker*, 1955.

¹⁹ See *The Anti-social Family*, W. Barrett and M. Mactonish, 1982.

²⁰ *The Loudspeaker* February, 1958

Finally, another common feature is to overlay the acknowledgement of work competences with explicit references to femininity and sexuality, in ways which sometimes appear to prioritise the latter, as in:

"Here we found an attractive young lady who was also a skilled platewiper."²¹

What I want to suggest here is that such a repertoire of characterisations draws selectively upon key aspects of the culture of femininity and domesticity in the workplace, and indeed upon important features of the experience and self-identity of the women involved. However, these limited examples provide suggestive evidence that this appropriation of such themes is indeed quite selective, particularly in glossing over the mundane experiences of women as workers and as wage earners. In this sense they help to document some of the implications of Westwood's observation that:

"But working outside the home is not about becoming a worker, it is most crucially about becoming a woman."²²

Clearly, much more research would need to be done to pin down the various ways in which management attitudes and perspectives selectively appropriate, and perhaps selectively reinforce, themes and priorities celebrated within the workplace culture of the women workers in such factories as the GEC. This would have to involve a fuller discussion of some of the contradictory elements within management's own repertoire of female stereotypes; an attempt to trace through the practical impact of such stereotypes within the workplace; and an investigation of the extent to which the views and activities of the women themselves contested, coexisted with or colluded those stereotypes. In the remainder of this chapter I am only able to offer some exploratory comments on these features in relation to the organisation of gendered job structures in the workplace.

²¹ *The Loudspeaker* April 1948

²² Westwood, S. *All Day, Every Day*, p6

Gendered Job Structures

So far in this chapter I have discussed some aspects of the gendered shop-floor culture within the GEC, but I have said little about the specific character of the work performed and the ways in which this is gendered. This will be a major theme of my later chapters when I discuss such issues as skill, training, supervision, grading and job control in more detail. However in the remainder of this chapter I intend to explain some of the background considerations involved in the gendering of specific jobs and the broader division of labour at GEC. In particular I will focus on similarities and inconsistencies between management and worker conceptions of gendered jobs.

It is appropriate to highlight by quoting the Loudspeaker's suggestion that women were able to take on a range of jobs:

"Mrs G. Bailey came to the GEC straight from school twenty four years ago. She spent three years on section 23 winding resistors, then left for a brief spell. Since she returned she has done every operation on the section other than soldering: covering, varnishing, printing labels, everything concerned with finishing bobbins. She has also moved around, she started work at the Telephone Works and moved with the section to Whitefriars St. had spell at Helen St. She is now at Queen Victoria Rd." ²³

This extract suggests that women could move between quite a range of jobs and had the opportunity of working in several different plants. However alongside this the company often suggested that particular jobs were inevitably women's work:

"We pride ourselves that the standard of wiring is very high. But this is really a woman's job, and the men don't seem to take to it very well..... Actually, three quarters of our staff are married women." ²⁴

²³ The Loudspeaker May/June 1951

²⁴ The Loudspeaker April 1948

This is clearly an argument that women were suited to the work, while men were not. In my discussions with members of management I found they too largely agreed with this analysis. For instance in a discussion with a personnel manager of long service, whose job it was to recruit female manual workers, he commented:

"Well as I said before you see we found women very suited to many of our jobs. In jobs where there was lot of small components needing detailed work, women could do it, their hands were smaller, and they often had a knack, I don't know maybe from knitting or whatever, but they were good, of course then as time went on the labour intensive aspect was reduced a bit... but here again you couldn't beat the women on work that needs a lot of care, using solder, wiring.... They had that quality of dexterity."²³

As has been seen before, this theme of dexterity was a very common way of linking the sex typing of jobs with presumptions about competence drawn from the domestic sphere. However, although wiring work was largely depicted as "women's work" not all women so readily agreed:

"But I wasn't too good at cutting wires and using pliers, and soldering irons and such like. I got blisters on my fingers from attempting to cut stubborn wires. At home it was my husband who used wires, in fact I wouldn't know where to find a pliers in the house. The pliers was not for me. The needle was much more my instrument."²⁴

Here, the company's version of job stereotyping, the uncritical characterization of specific tasks as suited to women was clearly challenged. However, paradoxically, in this extract the respondent felt that the tools she was asked to use in the workplace were unfeminine, and were more suited to men, suggesting that the needle, previously a domestic tool, was more appropriate. In this case the respondent did not challenge the gendering of such jobs, but rather held a very precise image of gendered jobs, which led her to dispute the company's own legitimisation of the job structure in such terms.

²³ Interview with Retired Personnel Manager (b.1923) (GBC 1937-1980)

²⁴ Interview with M.A. (b.1913) (Worked at GBC 1933-1953)

Winding was another task depicted unequivocally as "women's work":

"The first operation in the manufacture of the standard type of capacitor is the winding, and to Mrs Godfrey, chargehand in the winding shop this is essentially a woman's task"²⁷

The Loudspeaker explained the layout, and the technology which characterised the range of jobs in the Coilwinding Department, thus giving a fuller indication of what was involved in this "women's work":

"For winding coils there are a half a dozen different kinds of machines available, at Whitefriars Street, numbering about 180 in all. These range from simple hand-operated spindles, and machines that wind coils singly to more complicated machines which wind ten coils at once, and automatically cut off, and insert interlacing paper insulation between each layer of the winding while the coils are being wound."²⁸

Despite the emphasis on automaticity, however when I later explored this issue with the women themselves the critical theme concerned the difficulty of coping with the work:

"Well you had to put the coil on the machine and you had to wind the wire on so many thousand yards. The problem was, you were only allowed to make two joins. It was similar to winding cotton on to a bobbin for a sewing machine. The art was to avoid making more than two joins. It was worked by a foot pedal and you used your hand to guide the wire. It had to be kept straight and consistent. If you accidentally gave it a jerk it would break. Oh God, the times it broke, and the times I cried over that job. I used to go down to the toilets and cry there, it was so frustrating. I would come back and start all over again. Then you got nearly to the end and it would start all over again. Oh that job."

Kate: "What was it about the work that made it so difficult?"

"Well, if you tensed up and placed you foot too heavy on the pedal, or too carefree, it would break. You had to get the feel of it, and eventually you got that certain touch, but I admit I

²⁷ The Loudspeaker, March 1948 P25

²⁸ The Loudspeaker, July, 1938, p.7.

never quite succeeded.²⁹

This extract challenges any simplistic view which makes an automatic identification between these tasks and established domestic skills, even though the respondent drew analogies with the sewing machine. Other women recounted similar frustrations with similar implications:

"One of the first jobs I did at GEC was coilwinding. At Spon Street there was a whole section laid out for this and it was all women. You sat at a machine, and it was a bit like a sewing machine, now everybody knows that not all people can sew, see, anyway you had to use your hands and feet, and it was awful, I mean you were not allowed to break the wire, you could only have a couple of joins, you had to be very skilled to do it. Now the thing was if you had more than a couple of breaks, you started all over again, and you lost money."³⁰

Here the woman spells out even more clearly that it cannot be assumed that women have domestic or other skills which immediately blossom when encountering work defined as "feminine." Some of the implications of these reflections emerged in further discussions with a woman convenor, when I was told:

"I don't know how correct it is, but there used to be a saying at GEC that out of every twenty women only two or three at most made coilwinders, and I'm not saying good mind. Now coilwinding was a women's job, and was not a skilled job, but it was a job that needed a lot of skill, and the same goes for a lot of the work at GEC."³¹

This comment makes two important points. Firstly it refutes the view that this task was particularly suited to women as such, and therefore challenges the basis for its gender specificity. Secondly, it underlines the point that the job required a considerable degree of skill, making training essential.

²⁹ Interview with Mrs H. (b.1910) (Worked at GEC 1949-1959 1963-1964)

³⁰ Interview with B.D. (b.1920) (Worked at GEC 1940s)

³¹ Interview with L.S. (b.1929) (Worked at GEC 1955-57, 1957-84)

I have already noted that dexterity was a recurring theme in management perspectives on the work of women at GEC, and this was given a characteristic gloss familiar from other feminist studies of women's work, namely that women were "nimble fingered".³² I now wish to discuss this rationale for the sexual division of labour in more detail, though without exploring issues such as training which will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. To do this I will explore some of the different representations of dexterity in the Loudspeaker as they relate to a variety of jobs. An appropriate starting point is a characteristic reference to assembly work which highlighted sensitivity to touch and sound:

"Very great ingenuity in organisation is required to cope with such immense quantities of small parts. What women call everyday work would make others dizzy working to a thousandth of an inch. At such fine limits it is a fact that *touch and sound* are more reliable indications of successful assembly than sight."³³

Elsewhere the Loudspeaker took such a characterization further, identifying dexterity in inspection as involving a "sixth sense":

"Starting with an intimate knowledge of the circuitry of the equipment in which there are women working as testers, like Sherlock Holmes they develop a remarkable degree of observation and deduction and many acquire an almost uncanny sixth sense for locating faults."³⁴

In fact testers were competent in the use of a range of measuring instruments like micrometers and gauges, so that it appears that technical competence is glossed over in such a characterization. By comparison the next extract perhaps more accurately captures the meaning given to the notion of dexterity in the context of repetitive work:

"So deftly can Dulcie paint tops that often she exceeds an output of 1,000 capacitors per day."³⁵

³² See Elton, D. Pearson, R. (1981) Nimble Fingers make cheap Workers. *Feminist Review* Vol 7-9 1981.

³³ The Loudspeaker Nov. 1938 P.4

³⁴ The Loudspeaker Spring 1958 P50

³⁵ The Loudspeaker Feb. 1948 P.25

Painting capacitors on a repetitive basis could be described as a semi-skilled job, and here competence was conceived as coming from the experience of the worker, and the acquisition of a knack. The demands of soldering were seen in similar terms. Thus in the context of an extended account of technical initiative, one writer observes:

"Just after our chassis had passed the first inspector we noticed that coloured wires as well as components were beginning to make their appearance and before long there was a positive forest of wires. The chassis now had quite a complicated look about it, and we paused to ask Mrs Prosser how she knew where to connect the various wires. 'From that sample', she said with a wave of her hand as she picked up a hissing soldering iron and ran solder expertly round five or six connections, but we noticed she had not even glanced at it. Asking if she likes the work, she says 'There is plenty of variety to it.' At a further stage in the assembly process the push of a button switch unit had been added and getting at various bits seemed to call for the skill of a master surgeon,"³⁶

Not all comments are so detailed, and in other examples it was difficult to see how and where female dexterity was located. For instance:

"Though transistors have been known for some time it is only recently that modern methods have made their manufacture possible on a large scale. They are now being turned out at the GEC whose engineers are among the pioneers for the new device. And there is a connection between the *nimble fingered girls* who work on the new devices in the GEC factory and North Country miners sweating at the coal face. For some of the coal goes to the gas works and it is from the flue dust which accumulates as the coal is transformed into coke that germanium, the metal used in the transistor is extracted"³⁷

In this discussion of technical development male engineers are given a privileged place while women figure in terms of an unspecified potential dexterity (and the link with miners remains a far fetched way of commenting on technical details). However what remains important

³⁶ The Loudspeaker, February, 1948, pp30,31

³⁷ Coventry Evening Telegraph 13 May 1954 P6 C3

about the comment is that the reader is reminded that women were important for their dexterity during this period.

Furthermore it would appear that dexterity remains important from the management perspective, for in a recent interview the works manager pointed out:

"And in the field of telecommunications where everything is becoming minaturized will make dexterity very important, and of course women remain ideal in that way. This is why I think work opportunities within the company are far better for women than they ever have been."³⁸

A discussion with female stewards revealed a somewhat different shopfloor perspective in that it emphasised exclusion from higher technology:

"Well they have all this new technology and stuff like computers to do everything but women are not getting the training, nor the chance to work them. They wanted us for our manual skills."³⁹

At the same time this comment corresponds with the management perspective in a key respect, in that all women could hope for was manual jobs: they would expect to be excluded from the more technical and better paid opportunities with the company.

In an discussion with a former supervisor he summed up the complexities of the process of gendering female competence in the following terms:

"Well of course no group of managers ever sat down and decided that they were going to develop and present that to the women, but I think if you put people in a ghetto, they produce the attributes of the ghetto, and if those attributes are about being 'nimble fingered', well I suppose they do become 'nimble fingered'; and I suppose men are also 'nimble fingered', but the reality is that is how the women perceived themselves. And if you are put on a job where those expectations of nimbleness are a requirement, there becomes a self

³⁸ Interview with Works Manager (bushouse) (Worked at GBC 1984)

³⁹ Interviews with L.W. and M.P. This experience corresponds with the findings of Cockburn in *Machinery of Domineance*.

selection; if you are clumsy you disappear and sell shoes in a shop. And of course this situation reinforced the stereotype that women were 'nimble fingered', they soon learned to be, because the only women to survive were the nimble fingered women.⁴⁰

This discussion provides part of the explanation of the perpetuation of the stereotyping of female competence as dexterity. It suggests that specific features were associated with the work, which gave rise to a set of management expectations which were then presented to the workers as a need to be 'nimble fingered'. In response the women attempted to meet that expectation in order to sustain themselves in work, and while doing so, they too became enmeshed in the gendering ethos, thus identifying and signalling their competence as dexterity. Developing 'dexterity' was the way to become established in the workplace.

While most of the jobs I have discussed so far were organized in the Electrical engineering sections, which were predominantly female, women were also employed in the Mechanical engineering department as machine operators, predominantly working hand operated machines in the machine shop areas. Women were employed in this section on machines requiring more manual intervention and were classed as semi-skilled, yet they were not employed for their technical competence but rather for their dexterities. (For further discussion of the division of labour in this section see chapter seven, section three.) An examination of the "women's work" in the Mechanical engineering sections allows me to highlight some of the contradictions which were evident in the criteria which demarcated the boundaries between male and female work. There were many different types of machines in this section, including more power driven machines which were easier and less strenuous to operate apparently. While the company tended to allocate women to smaller machines evidence from the Loudspeaker suggests that, contrary to the stereotypes, many women disliked the intricate work associated with these presses, and showed a preference for the heavier machines:

⁴⁰ Interview with Mr.B. (b.1942) (Worked at GIBC 1963-1977)

"At the other end of the scale we have dolly presses, small light power presses which are not popular with the operatives because of the intricate nature of the small tasks they perform. Persuading the girls who are working on dolly presses to work on the heavier machines is not difficult, but you try to persuade one of the girls off the the heavy presses to work on lighter machines."⁴¹

Furthermore, oral evidence suggests that when necessary management allocated women to any of the machines in this section:

"Well I was at GBC for twenty-four years in all, and I worked in the machine shop alongside men, but they got more money, I worked on all kinds of machines doing all kinds of jobs, but then before I left there was talk of closing the machine shop down, and all the women there like myself had been there for years and years, and years. But they never had any qualms about putting us to work on any job, it depended how many people they had. But it was alright, I got better money, it was piecework you know, of course we didn't get what the men got."⁴²

This suggests that, although the company promoted the link between women and the hand operated machines, in practice they did not always adhere to this. Women worked in a range of tasks on single purpose semi-mechanical machines doing milling and operating capstans. Furthermore, although they earned less money relative to their male colleagues, women preferred the larger machines because they were nevertheless able to increase their earnings on work that offered less tedium.

Another respondent elaborated on the limited but real opportunities from movement from the smaller presses, regarded by the company as clearly women's work, onto other machines:

"Well after six months running errands, I went into the press shop, and I was put on the dolly presses, they put us girls on the "dollies". Women were on the smaller machines in so far as I can remember. It was very mucky. You were constantly soaked in oil and all that.

⁴¹ The *Londgaker* Dec. 1947 p109

⁴² Interview with Mrs. L. (b.1929) (Worked at GBC 1954-1978)

The money was very poor on the dollies, and they were more fiddly than the automatics I remember. But it was better money than the other sections, and there was even better money on the bigger capetans. You could do drilling, milling and so on. But getting on them was the problem. Even the small machines, well in the 1930s I was able with Saturday and from working 7.30 a.m. to 6.00pm in the week to earn two pounds. Then a girl's wages was only about ten shillings.⁴³

This comment captures the mix of constraints and opportunities involved, both on the 'dollies' -which though women's work, involved both dirt and relatively high wages -and on the bigger automatics high wages -where work was less tedious. As one woman summed it up:

"I worked on a capetan, the work was dirty and you came home smelling of oil and factory but the money was good and the work even if repetitive was also easy, and what did I work for, if not for the money."⁴⁴

During this period then it was common for women to work on capetans despite the nature of job stereotyping throughout the factory. At the same time one should not lose sight of the more usual experience of women in the machine shop, for they remained concentrated on the lighter machines. While a member of the younger cohort summarised this experience in commenting on her work on an evening shift in the machine shop:

"Well I never minded working in the press shop. I don't see anything wrong in it. Someone had to do the work, but it was very small, not the batches, but the actual size of the components. I did both drilling and work on the hand presses. Every now and then according to the job you were doing adjustments had to be made. Then the setter did that. What I did was to insert a piece of metal, and knock little holes in it, and from there you went on to another machine which was electrically operated, and you inserted a piece of metal, and had it pressed back in. The other one was hand presses, but we did not have the great power presses in our shop. On the hand presses you had to use little tweezers (forceps) to pick up

⁴³ Interview with B.B. (b.1913) (Worked at GBC 1929-1966)

⁴⁴ Interview with Mrs B. (b.1913) (Worked at GBC 1930-1951)

the metal, and put it in place. Now it was very easy to build up speed."⁴⁵

In this respondent's description of a common type of work, two critical features are identified: merely that the components she worked on were small, and that some of the machines were hand operated. This underlines a widespread pattern where speed and the ability to tolerate sodium was important, and as such this comment coincides quite closely with the company's stereotypical presentation of women's work as 'dexterity'.

Another important issue raised by several of the above comments concerns dirt as a characteristic feature of the work in the machine shop, and this raises the question of the manner in which this could feature as a basis for gender differentiation. The woman quoted earlier endured the grime in return for better wages, but other women elsewhere in the factory saw it in different terms:

"Now you see in an engineering factory with a machine shop type of work you get a different type of person. You see over the years I think people rather tended to put machine shop people down because they worked in overalls. The women had their hands in oil and suds. They wore leggings made of brown paper to protect their legs. Of course naturally there was a lot of noise, machinery flying about, belts slapping and clanging ect. It was so noisy they were forced to shout when they wanted to talk. I mean they had loud voices, you know, but I never looked down on them in the machine shop. The machine shop was the birth of everything else. I couldn't have worked in the machine shop. I would have hated it. I am not toffee nosed, but I wouldn't have liked the oil and the grease and the suds."⁴⁶

This reveals a very complex set of attitudes. It shows that it is not just the company reproducing gender stereotypes, but that a set of gendered divisions, assumptions and identities held by the women themselves could reinforce traditional boundaries even against employer practices. This respondent suggests that some women preferred clean light work in exchange for less money. A second and related theme was both the appreciation and the denigration of those who

⁴⁵ Interview with B.J. (b. 1936) (Worked at CBC 1958-69)

⁴⁶ Interview with N.B. (b. 1917) (Worked at CBC 1932-1977)

work in the machine shop. To work in the machine shop meant that such workers were applauded for their productivity and initiative, and equally deplored for their lack of social grace. There is a hint that it is the coarseness and strength intermingled with the oil and grease that has created the wealth, and has allowed others to live a life with the veneer of respectability. The implication is that to get too close to that reality would soil that image. Here we can see the understanding that dirty work has been linked to the working class, and while it is excusable and in fact a proper pursuit for male members of the working class, the involvement of women redefines them as coarse, tough and unfeminine. Such an image was an undesirable one for working class women, but one that was easily acquired. On balance the respondent despite, her approval of the machine shop as the core of engineering, regarded these features as undermining to femininity. Other women too endorsed this sentiment, as the following excerpt shows:

"When I started there you had shafts and the flying belts. Huge belts were turning out everything. It was rattle, rattle and a lot of smelly suds. It was a loud raucous place, and women were forced to cover their hair. There was a lot of grease and particles flying about. I could have got a job there but I did not want oily shoes. You would be covered in oil and who wanted that. There were some nice people there, but my friend said they were loud-mouthed."⁴⁷

Such comments seem likely to have reinforced the managerial stereotype of femininity outlined at the beginning of this chapter. From these women's viewpoint dirty noisy work was more appropriate to the male domain, and women who ventured into that territory risked not only their appearances but also reputations. Again this set of views did not simply correspond with the division of labour implemented by the company. Furthermore, such views were grounded in part in real features of the work: the work was alienating and was unhealthy, but for both male and female workers. Nevertheless, the question of worker health is not the central concern; rather what is being questioned is the effect this work had on the image and representation of women. For a woman to dress in greasy dirty apparel was seen denigrating and defeminising.

⁴⁷ Interview with M.A. (b, 1913) (Worked at GBC 1953-1955)

There is some evidence in my interviews that it was the older women who more often articulated conventional views of the gendered division of jobs, though such views often accompanied criticism of the specific contours of gendering at GEC. By way of contrast the younger women also expressed very complex attitudes to the gendering of work.

Thus for a younger respondent the difference between clean and dirty work mattered but at the same time she did not see this as a justifiable reason for the sexual division of labour:

"Well you see at the GEC overall, apart from in the machine shop, which was all grease, oil and suds, you could dress rather daintily with your pretty overall brightening up the shop. You could cover your lap with a piece of towel in case you dropped solder on it. All you dirtied was your hands, and you hadn't a nail to call your own. It was not so much that the job did not involve some kind of skills and responsibilities as much as it was clean, that's what I'm talking about. You see as women we are brought up to be clean and presentable. And it is not so much that women have a choice nor indeed do men, but more that we are slotted into categories. That is how it is from way back. I would have been a good motor mechanic, or technician who knows. That's what has got to change."⁴⁸

This respondent worked exclusively in the Electrical engineering section, but her attitude differs from the earlier viewpoint in two ways. She is more concerned with what she sees as sexual stereotyping, and is less concerned with status implications; indeed sexual stereotyping is explicitly challenged. However although this respondent challenges the view that dirt should form the basis for the sexual division of labour, (for she advocates that women might work as mechanics), there must still remain some doubt about how far gendered job stereotyping is challenged, for in her description of working conditions cleanliness is pinpointed, as well as a concern for personal appearance.

Paradoxically, the pattern of development of the labour process meant that the "cleaner" electrical engineering sections were those that were widely available to the younger cohort of

⁴⁸ Interview with B.C. (1987) (Worked at GEC (1962-1972))

women. Thus any erosion of the reservations women themselves had about dirty mechanical engineering work did little to modify the conventional sexual division of labour.

In this chapter I have attempted to show the complex interplay of attitudes and action between management and women workers in the perpetuation of a workplace culture which located the 'woman' in the workplace in three somewhat contradictory ways: through the culture of reproduction, the stereotyping of jobs as women's work, and the representation of female workplace competence as dexterity. In conclusion a number of different strands has been identified in the presentation of what is involved in women's work. Firstly, this involves management's definition of the work as work for women, and the way this is defined in relation to domestic commitments and dexterities. Secondly, women drew on their own experience to elaborate their ideas about women's work, which are somewhat at odds with those of management but rarely constitute an active challenge to management. This issue in dispute between the management and the women is not so much the gendered view of work, but a specific management initiated gendered view of work. In the next chapter I want to explore further the importance of the gendering of work, when I will be looking at job descriptions, training programmes and attitudes to skill.

CHAPTER SIX

Skill And Female Labour.

Introduction

In this chapter my first concern will be to illustrate the types of tasks women were involved with, their perceptions of this work and its relevance for skill. What is presented is a partial account of some of the complex features of work and 'skill', and in particular is an interpretation of the experiences of the women concerned in regard to a particular form of semi-skilled work. While the women consider various factors in their perceptions of skill, the one overarching feature centres personal competences in relation to tasks and activities, and on the notion of quality, which refers to work performance in these tasks and activities. This whole discourse on quality which is also linked to authority relations should not be surprising in that it is their rationalization of their ability in the face of being marginalized from the conventional routes to skill. Against this background their comments suggests that experience and performance should constitute one of the major ways of appreciating work and 'skill.' At the same time my second concern will be to question institutionalized patterns of power and established vocabularies which gloss over complexities in their account of women's work and women's competence, and this will involve looking beneath the management presentation and perception of skill requirements.

In developing this particular assessment of work and skill this chapter is divided into several sections. The first section examines established notions of skill, seeking out their relevance in understanding the nature of women's expertise. In the second section I begin my substantive analysis and explore management's contradictory and ambiguous view of the women's skills. In the third section I use interview and other material to outline some of the work tasks and try to convey the kind of demands made on the women concerned. This provides the context for the next three sections. Following this, in the fourth section, I look more carefully

at the aims, purpose and quality of training. I argue that training programmes and 'on the job experience' represent evidence of expertise. In a fifth section I show that there was little hierarchy in the job structure and very few promotional opportunities, therefore there was little formal or financial recognition for women's developed expertise. In the sixth and final empirical section I examine some examples of the organization of job and gender boundaries and also consider generational features in the presentation of 'skill' definitions. Some of the implications of this material are then discussed at the end of the chapter.

Theoretical Debate

Conventional conceptions of 'skill' may be seen to incorporate a number of related features: the character of tasks and activities performed; the competences possessed by the person doing the work; the status and rewards accorded; and finally distinctive patterns of job control in the workplace. Common sense definitions may treat such features as status, rewards and job control as reflections of the substantive content of tasks and activities, and the demarcation between skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled work may be regarded as an unproblematical outcome of the technical division of labour. However, sociological analyses of skill have emphasised that the construction of skill and skill identities is a social rather than simply a technical process - and this is a theme which has been developed particularly by feminist writers who have sought to examine the gendered character of the division of labour.

While sociologists stress a recognition that the construction of skill is a social process they nevertheless differ in their approach. In particular some writers continue to privilege the character of tasks and activities as a critical resource in the social construction of skills, while others adopt what Little (1982) terms the strong social definition of skill, in which the distinctive character of tasks and activities is more or less incidental to the attributes of skilled status and the establishment of job control.

Illustrative of the first approach is the work of Thompson (1983) and Cockburn (1983, 1986); while Phillips and Taylor (1980) and Mainwaring and Wood (1985) provide examples of the second emphasis. There are further important differences between these authors, between those who acknowledge the importance of gender relations, and those who appear not to give it equal attention. Both Phillips and Taylor and Cockburn fall into the first category, while Thompson and Woods and Mainwaring place less importance on this issue. Nevertheless I will show the latter authors in their different ways contribute to an understanding of women's relationship to skill.

Many of the different emphases in understanding the question of skill have been developed in response to Braverman's (1974) attempt to explain the changed nature of work in the period of

monopoly capitalism. It will therefore be useful to start my discussion with his work. One of the central issues raised by Braverman's (1974) deskilling analysis concerns the extent in which work in this period of capitalist production can be identified as skilled. For according to Braverman the skills in which the power of the craft worker is premised have been swept away by a series of employer offensives during the evolution of capitalist development in the 19th and 20th centuries. These offensives have been characterised by the appropriation of worker knowledge and its transference into management and technological structures which subordinate the worker in a system of control, making the employer the beneficiary of past worker knowledge, and denying such knowledge to present and future workers. Thus they provide the means to circumscribe worker initiative, and to dictate the speed of worker performance, to subordinate the production process to the interests of profit. From Braverman's perspective the central focus of the employer's interests is to maintain control over worker knowledge, for otherwise this provides the basis from which workers can effectively challenge employer goals. As the craft worker represents the embodiment of worker knowledge, Braverman's whole discussion of skills and deskilling is preoccupied with the male craft apprenticed worker.

Indeed, although Braverman does raise the question of the incorporation of women into waged work, he regards their entry as an outcome of the employer offensive in the attack on male skills. For instance the feminization of white collar work has been largely seen in this light. Thus, from the Braverman perspective, women are regarded unequivocally as an instrument, but also as victims of the deskilling process, without raising questions about the adequacy of the male craft yardstick for this assessment.

In his discussion of the contemporary degradation of work Braverman warns that the presence of job ladders does not necessarily indicate a hierarchy of skill for underneath this superficial presentation lies a convergence of worker activities in the direction of unskilled tasks. Central to this notion is the idea of an undifferentiated mass of workers who have lost control over the labour process. Although Braverman is not saying that there are no 'skills', for he recognizes the emergence of new skills, he envisages that such 'new skill' will then be confronted and eroded by the capitalist strategy of deskilling.

While Braverman's account has been influential; it has also prompted many criticisms of the development of the relationship between employers and workers, and queries whether skills have been eroded to the extent that Braverman suggests.¹ In particular Elger (1979) offers an overview of the early critiques of the Braverman approach, insisting that employer worker relations have not evolved simply in terms of the imperative to control and deskill, but rather out of a process involving contradictory employer objectives and conscious worker struggle, which must be understood within the context of wider political and economic conditions. While these initial arguments surrounding Braverman's analysis began to raise questions about the social organization and definition of skills, they did not develop an alternative analysis very far. As the labour process debate developed it increasingly focused on the conflict between capital and labour as one centering on the questions of control and skill, and whilst it has made a considerable contribution to understanding the social construction of skill, it does not pursue the issue of the gendering of skills in any systematic way. In particular Wood and Mainwaring (1983) and to a lesser extent Thompson (1983) underline the extremely problematic character of conventional skill categories and develop an analysis which goes beyond the standard discourse preoccupied with the craft/non-craft divide. The more sophisticated treatments of these issues have, however, been developed by feminist writers especially Cockburn (1983, 1986), Phillips and Taylor (1980) and Game and Pringle (1984).

I will now provide a discussion of the above authors in the following sequence. I will begin with Thompson who provides a useful overview of the importance of gender in the construction of the hierarchization of work and the sexual division of labour. I will then consider the feminist authors who develop a much more critical approach to the debate in the systematic analysis of particular instances in the formulation of the sexual division of labour; and the marginalisation of women from skill and skilled work. Finally I will review Mainwaring and Wood because they offer what purports to be an alternative approach to skill and unskilled work.

¹ Conference of Socialist Economists: (1977) (Brighton Labour Process Group) Friedman (1977), Thompson (1983) for summaries.

Thompson's (1983) work can be taken as a representative summation of the modern labour process approach. The main tenets of his argument are: firstly, that while he largely accepts the deskilling thesis, he acknowledges that there may be residues of skill in some areas of work; secondly, that those who possess or practice this partial legacy of 'skill' are not necessarily rewarded in terms of job ladders and status; and thirdly, such groups of workers include women and agricultural workers. However, while he acknowledges the sexual division of labour, and suggests that the lack of status and rewards in terms of women's jobs should not necessarily be seen as a lack of 'skill', yet he fails to offer any alternative approach to skill; for his analyses of skill still depends on the model of tasks and activities as practised by the craftsmen. Nevertheless although he fails to integrate these themes, his work raises a number of questions. Firstly, his recognition that there can be a disjunction between competences, tasks performed, rewards and status opens up the question of how women are located in regard to each of these aspects. The mention of agricultural workers, who may exercise a residue of the craft competences but rarely receive comparable rewards, possibly implies that some groups of women workers possess similar skills. Secondly, however, his own recognition of the history of the sexual division of labour, raises questions of how that history has influenced the organization and definition of skills, competences and rewards. Given the location of such gendered competences as needlework and cookery within the domestic sphere - the significance of residues of old skills is itself likely to be gendered. Finally, Thompson also largely agrees with the deskilling thesis and that women are in jobs that are accorded the least status and pay. This raises the questions about the kind of labour process they occupy, the specific kind of demands this imposes on such women and the employer's perception of their labour power.

Over the last decade a range of feminist literature whilst appreciative of the contribution made by the deskilling approach has argued the need to go beyond an analysis concerned purely with capital labour relations since capitalism has not seen workers as an undifferentiated mass, but on the contrary has differentiated workers in terms of such features as gender. A classic statement of this general position is provided by Hartmann (1979) who argues that while a Marxist analysis of workplace relations provides an explanation of the different places required by

capitalist employers in a hierarchy of labour, it does not explain why women (and blacks) end up in the unskilled secondary sector at the bottom of the hierarchy. She goes on to suggest that such places are filled in this hierarchy as a result of an arrangement between groups of male workers and capitalist employers whereby preference is given to white male workers at the expense of women and other groups. In this sense it is clear that there are other tensions in the labour process beyond that of employer and worker, and these include tensions between male and female workers in competition for better and more skilled jobs.

Such issues are taken up in a more detailed and substantive fashion by Cockburn (1983, 1986), especially in her ethnographic study of print workers where she analyses the relationship of gender relations and male power. In this study she examines what is, according to standard objective criteria the deskilling of the print industry, and by implication explains how women are marginalised from work defined as skilled. Central to her understanding of skill is the notion of the male workers' ability to capture and recapture an understanding of machinery and technology and to appropriate it as an exclusively male. For Cockburn skill is embodied in what she sees as 'hands on' ability of skilled male workers to operate and maintain the new technology. Essentially what she is describing is the process whereby male workers with a history and roots in the craft tradition devise a set of strategies which enables them to appropriate the new work by operating and maintaining it, and to redefine this as skill. In turn this new 'skill' forms what is an increasingly precarious platform in the creation of job control, job ladders and pay differentials. One of the more interesting aspects of this work is her observation of the way female skill is appropriated by the male workers as a male skill, for instance the demise of the lithograph meant that some of the new technology in print made typing skills important. Furthermore, while the printers felt that their skills had been eroded through similarities with the key board, they found that training was essential, thus re-appropriating the 'female skill' typing as part of the labour process in print. Cockburn's evaluation of this process of loss of skill and the re-appropriation of 'female skills', integral to the reformulation of the printers' skill is offered in the following terms:

"But what is a man's skill if, say, 80% of it cannot be practiced? All that is demanded in the new job is perhaps 10% of the old knowledge and 10% increment recently acquired."² Although Cockburn recognizes that typing is a skilled task which requires considerable training, nevertheless it can be gleaned that in no way does she see it as commensurable with the old print skills.

Cockburn's notion of skill refers to a 'hands on ability' in understanding machinery and technology, where such knowledge takes on an effective political significance in the reformulation of craft power. Referring to the compositors, skill is defined in the following terms:

"There is the skill that resides in the man himself, accumulated over time, each new experience adding something to a total ability (personal competence). There is the skill demanded by the job - which may or may not match the skill of the worker. (tasks and activities) And there is the political dimension of skill: that which a group of workers or a trade union can successfully defend against the challenge of employers and of other groups of workers."³

This analysis of skill is constructed from the author's observation, and interpretation of the experiences of a particular work setting, where all the conventional criterion for skill are present. From the perspective of Cockburn's wider analysis, it is clear that the notion of 'hands on ability' refers to the ability to control technology, through the design, the maintenance and the operation of such technology which she sees as a male monopoly.

Whilst Cockburn's excellent study of the dynamics of male power provides an understanding of some of the processes leading to the marginalisation of women from technology, yet, using such a narrow definition of skill also has the effect of potentially excluding women entirely from appreciative analysis of their skills and competences, since there are no indications that women are making any significant inroads into either the design or maintenance of new technology, whilst in some areas of work they are losing out to male workers in the operation of some technology.⁴ Since women are not likely to break through the technology barrier such a definition

² Cockburn, C. *Bronhen* p114

³ Cockburn, C. *Bronhen* p112

⁴ West, J. Ed. *Women, Work and the Labour Market* (1982), also Cockburn (1983) *Machinery of Domination*

immediately excludes women and presents a grim picture in connection to any claim they may have on skill. At the same time some of the problems associated with the male craft yardstick emerge in Cockburn's study, in her documentation of the fragile foundations of job controls and pay levels and in the equivocation regarding the significance of their competences newly appropriated from the female workers.

While Cockburn has explored the gendered character of craftwork Phillips and Taylor have developed a more distinct critique of the male bias in the social construction of skill. Drawing on a number of studies of semi-skilled workers they seek to demonstrate that demarcations between categories of relatively skilled and male workers on the one hand and less skilled and women workers on the other are quite superficial, and thus suggests that the generation of work hierarchies is strongly gendered. They also argue that the pay differences between male and female workers have little to do with real skill distinctions, but are rather premised on the notion of the family wage. In this sense they would suggest that the presence of job control, status and rewards are more to do with social processes of skill definitions and collective organization, than any real reflection of the complexity of tasks and activities. The nub of the Phillips and Taylor argument concerns the link between gender and claims to skill, for they argue that what is socially recognised as skill is gendered. What they suggest is that male workers are able to claim a higher premium in the labour market compared with their female counterparts by being able to lay claim to sets of economic responsibilities denied to women. This suggests that in the examination of women's work it might be fruitful to look beyond the construction of skill as reflected in job ladders and pay, and look more carefully at the problematical relationship between these features and the competences possessed by women and the capabilities demanded by specific tasks and activities in which they are involved.

This issue is taken on board by Gane and Pringle (1984). Within this context their central concern is with the relationship of gender to the social organization of work, and definitions of skill. Their study incorporates an examination of the sexual division of labour in a range of areas

of employment including the industrial and the tertiary sector. On this basis they say they accept the deskilling thesis but only in the case of particular kinds of work: implying that deskilling has not advanced in the same way in all sectors of the labour process. In regard to manufacturing what they seek to demonstrate is that automation and other new technology has merely led to the re-formulation of the sexual division of labour, where men generally have a prior claim to such technologies although the work involved is less skilled and stereotypically more suited to female labour. For instance, in the 'whitegoods' industry women were pushed out of the press shop with the introduction of more automated machines, though this does not necessarily involve skilled work. However, alongside this process they also identify other facets of the gendering of work, which do not simply fit this model. Thus in their introduction they outline a wider agenda of issues which implies that quite possibly 'women's work' has not undergone deskilling to the extent of 'male work':

"In particular, we must reconsider very carefully the idea that work has been systematically deskilled under late capitalism. Whose work? Where does that leave those whose work has never been defined as skilled? Are jobs inherently skilled or are they only acknowledged as such as a result of struggle? What about new skills, including those associated with coping with pressure and monotony? Why have women never been in a position to assert that they too have skills? While deskilling is an important and useful concept it needs to be applied with somewhat more caution than it frequently is."⁵

However, while this is a thought provoking comment much of their discussion remains closer to the deskilling thesis. Thus in their analysis of women in junior managerial positions in the retail industry, they suggest that such women have been recruited on the basis of domestic skills, which implies that they acknowledge that such skill is embodied in personal competences which are then transformed into performance of paid tasks and activities. The irony from my perspective is that Carne and Pringle then go on to argue that such women are relatively less skilled on the basis of evidence about their poor pay and the lack of a developed career structure

⁵ Carne and Pringle, *Gender at Work*, p17

which are then transformed into performance of paid tasks and activities. The irony from my perspective is that Game and Pringle then go on to argue that such women are relatively less skilled on the basis of evidence about their poor pay and the lack of a developed career structure for women. Thus although Game and Pringle suggest a new approach be adopted in the analysis of work, they themselves fail to do so. For while they do examine the nature of tasks and activities, they assess such features in terms of the traditional criterion of status and rewards. Furthermore, while they advocate a closer examination of such features as coping with monotony and boredom, they fail to provide the framework in which to do this. What is interesting in their work, is that they suggest that some work may contain residues of skill, and such work may involve women.

In some ways there are similarities between the work of Game and Pringle and Elson and Pearson's (1986) study of female workers as they consider the relationship between domestic skill and female wage labour, although they examine different work settings. However Elson and Pearson offer a rather different appreciation of the competences of low waged women workers. They suggest that women are recruited to manufacturing industries in the Third World on the basis of their domestic skills and their low cost.

Against this background one of the most important aspects of Elson and Pearson's work is that they argue that domestic 'skill' defined as dexterity can be bought cheaply by the employers. What they also seem to be saying is that women have a kind of personal competence aside from their cheapness which is actively sought by the employers. Such potentials are derived from the experience of domestic labour, embodied in personal competence and developed into expertise in the workplace. In contrast to Game and Pringle, Elson and Pearson do not see a correspondence between lack of rewards and a lack of skill, but re-open the question of the unacknowledged and unrewarded skills which women workers may possess.

In relation to the above arguments Mainwaring and Wood offer an interesting contribution and an important perspective to the debate on skill, for they direct attention to the actual patterns of tasks and activities in apparently unskilled waged work. Whilst Mainwaring and Wood accept

categories from a different starting point attending to tasks and activities:

"Tacit skills refer to the feel and discretion which form the basis for subjectivity in even non-skilled work and are vital to efficient performance in all work situations."⁶

This comment makes three points. Firstly there is a focus on subjectivity, and the active engagement of workers in their labour; secondly they suggest that all forms of work makes some demands of those, who perform them, and in this sense contain facets of skill; and thirdly they argue that the daily experience of work forms the grounding for some significant knowledge among workers. Together these features point to the existence of subjectively meaningful forms of tacit skill. The implication is that studies of worker competences require a closer look at tasks and activities and much greater attention paid to the worker's interpretation of such performance.

In their construction of the notion of tacit skill the authors draw on a number of different sources. These include their own experiences in the study of particular forms of unskilled work, like line work and lesser skilled forms of machine operating; the observations of authors such as Kuusterer; and the work of Burawoy on consent. Drawing together these strands they explore the importance of the co-operative dimensions of work and employment relations and stress that even in what appears to be the most alienating work there is some room for the expression of worker creativity and initiative built into worker performance. In such a situation workers develop a working knowledge, or tacit skill which ensures they have a meaningful role in the production process. Such knowledge, as Wood recognizes does not always confer power on those who possess it, and although management may well rely on the skills of such workers, it is not always the case that this can be translated into an advantage for particular groups like women, for other factors enter into the contest. Nevertheless, the advantage of this perspective is that it raises fresh questions about the situations of weaker groups of workers like the low paid, black workers and women workers. For if their work is examined against the conventional framework emphasising as it does that skill is reflected in rewards and job ladders, then their approach shifts emphasis to

⁶ Job Redesign by D. Knights & H. Willmott, p77

worker performance embodied in tasks, activities and personal competences. In turn this offers a way of moving away from a narrow reliance on the craft model of skill. For instance, Wood's examples of personal skill which would not conventionally fall into the skill category includes workers being able to attend to problems arising during the operation of old plant and machinery. His notion of skill suggests a more careful and sensitive examination of work, placing emphasis on the nuances and complexities of jobs: for instance gaining familiarity with work processes which extend beyond formal practices, being aware of the problems and intricacies of the work; being able to detect a change in the sound of the machine, the feel of the component and finding solutions in a range of problems.⁷

Wood's notion of tacit skill is wide ranging and is sufficiently flexible to be applicable to work in many contexts and situations. One important implication of this is that it provides a point of reference for a sympathetic understanding of the experiences and assessments of work reported by weaker groups of workers. In this sense it allows weaker groups of workers a voice, and encourages closer investigation of the nature of their work, and the value it may have for the employer.

I wish to suggest that, although gender is not one of the author's considerations, the notion of tacit skill can be applied to the analysis of forms of semi or unskilled work performed by women. By paying attention to the accounts of such groups their views and evaluations of work can be obtained. While the authors do not differentiate between tacit skill and skill, one solution to this dilemma might be to suggest that tacit skill refers to facets of skill. On this basis an appreciation of forms of experience, competence and expertise which are related to specific tasks and activities can be developed, which may then be compared with, or related to the features which are somewhat problematically amalgamated together within more conventional conceptions of skill.

⁷ During the course of interviewing foremen I was informed by the foreman in an outdated machine shop, that disciplining workers was not feasible because of the day to day operational problems they faced. They suggested that they were soft on labourers for in return they relied on the goodwill, tacit skills, experience, and accumulated knowledge of the workers concerned in dealing with old, dilapidated machinery, which they argued had to be turned into performance each morning.

In reviewing the above literature what has emerged is the problematical and complex character of skill and the debate surrounding this notion. The picture of skill presented by this set of authors shows some agreement but also considerable differences. Areas of agreement are the identification of major features characterising skill, which includes, the complexity of tasks and activities, personal competences, gender, status, job ladders and pay. They diverge in that they choose to identify and emphasise specific themes from among these features. Despite the complex character of the debate some important strands can be drawn out. Firstly, there is a distinction between those who largely agree with deskilling and those who argue for the persistence of partial skills. Phillips and Taylor are perhaps closer to Braverman, while the remaining authors are more ambivalent.

Such ambivalence is reflected in the problem of the circulatory character of their argument. For although the notion of tacit skill provides a framework for the analysis of skill premised on the active experience, competence and expertise of workers involved; it has glossed over explanations as to why such skills remain unrecognized and unrewarded. This weakness has stemmed from the way the authors have insisted on the predominance of pay and rewards as a reflection of the complexity of tasks and activities; and as such is a return to the conventional methodology. The acceptance of pay as a acknowledgement of the quality of performance and complexity of work tasks circumvents the original recommendations -which emphasises the active experience of workers -for the route to the identification of, and recognition of skills is a much more complex and multi-dimensional process -than that monitored in pay structures.

What I tentatively set out to do in this chapter is firstly to explore the women's views of their competences, how they and others such as management judge such "skill". This discussion will be concerned with the notion of personal competence, how it is both acknowledged, but also glossed over in the case of GEC. In order to pursue this my discussion in a further section involves women describing their experiences working two main areas; bench work and "line" work. The aim of this is to highlight the complexity in the different jobs and as such provides a fairer exploration of the character of such tasks and activities. In a following section I explore the importance of training and job experience from both the management and the women's

work. The aim of this is to highlight the complexity in the different jobs and as such provides a fairer exploration of the character of such tasks and activities. In a following section I explore the importance of training and job experience from both the management and the women's perspective. I then tentatively explore job differentiation, job structure and the extent to which the women were rewarded for their competences. Finally I examine some examples of change in job and gender boundaries as well as documenting women's interpretation of change in their work and competence. However in the next section I will be looking at management's assessments of women's skills and competences.

Management's Perceptions of Women's Skill.

In this section I will discuss management's perception of the company's labour requirements, and their consequential understanding of female 'skill'. In doing so I will explain five related aspects of management thinking. Firstly, I will show that they had a very clear idea that the labour requirements were for speed and dexterity. Secondly I will consider how this requirement was drawn from their assessment of the substantive nature and demands of the work, which they acknowledged was complex and intricate. Thirdly I will outline how, to fulfill this requirement, they looked for a particular personality orientation and in particular argued that patience was a prerequisite. Fourthly I will show that they argued that this set of criteria was gender specific and was characteristic exclusively of female labour. Finally I will explain how managers often claimed that this range of female labour characteristics was encompassed in dexterity which they equated with 'skill', but were less clear about this on closer questioning of the status of this 'skill'.

Management views of female competence as 'skill' were quite contradictory. On the one hand they often used the language of skills; however, on the other hand they often meant that female 'skill' could be equated with speed, accuracy, dexterity and docility, and the ability to deal with complex painstaking tasks, features which in turn were of contested significance. In particular different managers differed as to whether this constituted 'real' skill.

I will now explore a range of management views on this. A sceptical account is offered by a senior member of personnel management:

"Yes there has always been a requirement of speed but when we talk of skill it is a misnomer, what we are looking for is expertise more than skill. Skill is something where people learn basic principles and then build on that, as a toolmaker would. But women had expertise. Take working on relays, the fundamentals you learned in no time, but to be able to do it accurately and quickly took a lot of familiarity -and these people became very expert in that way. But to say that was a skill was a misnomer."⁸

⁸ Interview with Personnel Manager (CIBC 1963 Presses)

This manager's comment is important for it recognizes many of the essential constituents of female skills. Firstly, there is a clear admission that women acquired expertise. Secondly, clearly speed is a prerequisite which is then equated with expertise, so in some ways there is a very precise notion of the particular competence required. Thirdly, there is also a recognition that this expertise is gained through experience by working on particular jobs, where women can acquire accuracy and competence. However the yardstick in the judgement of this process is provided by the traditional craft apprenticeship, and on this basis female competence is devalued and glossed over, for he has a very precise notion of skill:

"Well because of the payments system in Coventry a skilled man was one who was time served."⁹

Summed up in this way the personnel manager favoured the conventional craft yardstick which was linked to a specific training period, formal skill recognition, and craft based pay awards; all of which underwrite an established pattern in skill recognition.¹⁰ From this perspective, although the women concerned had 'skills', they could in no way be said to resemble or compete with these established norms.

A rather different emphasis is provided by a former works manager who was at one point responsible for recruiting. He gave a more precise account of the qualities of female 'skills', and suggested:

"Well I always went around to the schools to look for girl labour. Now of course with girl labour we had a fantastic turnover, but you always do, and the only thing you can do is to keep on recruiting....Anyway you see with girl labour they have nimble fingers, and then we get them back when they are older....Women, girls ...well we found them to have patience....you see to learn the jobs. Now as M.... says although these girls and however experienced they were were not given any recognition, but they had skills, and indeed if we

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Note that in reality male workers could on occasion move from semi skilled to skilled rates and jobs without being time served. This is documented for the Birmingham district in Mackay *et al.* (1971)

let them they could do any of our work."¹¹

Alongside an emphasis on dexterity, women were also recruited according to criteria of work orientation: in particular they were considered to be more patient. Whilst acknowledging the conventional definition of craft skills, this manager also accepted that skills possessed by women workers were not rewarded with any recognition, despite the fact that women had ability over and above that actually deployed in the workplace.

Another former personnel manager endorsed these points in clearer terms:

"Well I think anybody who worked and was on production reckoned and really did recognize that female labour had skills. In a lot of instances there was a lengthy training period, we are not talking of a week or a fortnight; but teaching girls to adjust relays and wind transformers and to do intricate wiring operations from quite complicated drawings and diagrams took weeks and weeks, in fact months; but they are still classed as virtually unskilled."¹²

This account makes two central points essential to an understanding of the managerial perspective on women's skills. Firstly it makes the point that women had skill, but suggests that this recognition was rooted in an appreciation of women's role in the production process while remaining insulated from any reappraisal of the structure of rewards and recognition: such skill was given little recognition. Secondly this manager then identifies a number of substantive features linking the women concerned with his conception of skills, such as a lengthy training period, a description of some tasks as complex and intricate and requiring some manipulative ability, and interpretative skills in the reading of drawings. Using the conventional approach then competence was linked to the tasks and activities and to the personal competences such as dexterity and patience, which the company assumed characterized the women they recruited. These points and this view are resonant with part of women's understanding of their relationship to skill which I will now explore, and suggest that the social recognition and organization of

¹¹ Interview with Retired Works Manager (OBC 1927-1977)

¹² Interview with Retired Personnel Manager (OBC 1937-1984)

skilled status played a significant role in confining these workers to semi-skilled job categories and lower pay.

Women's Perceptions of Skill

A number of key benchmarks can be identified in the way that the women interviewed understand and perceive their skill. Such benchmarks include the conventional craft definition but also an appreciation of 'experience' which differs from that conception. However, the sense made of the notion of experience varied somewhat, and appeared to be influenced by specific work biographies. Current jobs were judged in terms which bore the marks both of work biographies and dominant notions of skill.

What I wish to suggest is that, without access to the conventional channel for gaining accredited skills these women nevertheless equated their experience with some sense of skill. However the dominant yardstick, the conventional craft definition, influenced their assessments of 'experience' in a number of ways. On the one hand possession of 'experience' sometimes leads to some contestation of the conventional conception of skill. On the other hand, however, the recognition of such a yardstick can lead to an uncertain and skewed sense of individual competence among these women. Indeed whatever interpretation these women give to their competences embodied in their experience, this is always overshadowed by the dominant male yardstick. My exploration of women's views on skill will provide an examination of the meaning given to 'experience' related both to their biographies and current experience, and will highlight tensions between the women's work experience and craft notions of skilled work.

Since biography and current job experience have such important implications for the women's interpretation of 'experience', they will be divided into four categories: firstly women who had worked in what they perceived as the superior elite in the male sector, for example, on semi-skilled work in a machine shop environment in the aircraft industry during the war; secondly, women who worked in a similar environment on semi-skilled jobs in the watchmaking industry; thirdly, women who worked in other engineering settings alongside semi-skilled men; and fourthly women who had a work biography which excluded factory work, or who had worked exclusively at the GBC.

I will now explore the different meanings these different sets of women give to the experience of work at GEC, beginning with the first category. Five of the women I interviewed had some experience of work in the aircraft industry, and they shared an eagerness to discuss this particular work experience, but the following account is the most distinctive and interesting. This respondent had been recruited for work in the aircraft industry during the war and later joined the GEC, and had this to say:

"Well in my view the work at the GEC was not skilled. It wouldn't have been either, not in my books anyway. I mean I worked in the aircraft industry and the aircraft had to be skilled. I mean it is not everyone they let help make an aeroplane. I mean crashes were serious. But they needed people. I mean you had to know what you were doing.... And at the GEC you had to be able to do the soldering and wiring. Now at the time I was there it was the soldering that mattered. It had to be spot on. And there's an art to soldering. The art is in making a dry point as they call it. Scrap was easily achieved. But compared to the aircraft industry it was nothing. I mean they had all those machines. And I mean we had the skilled men to set up. Well you see, I was on this course to see if I could do the work or not. They eventually choose four of us, not for our skill they said, but to see whether we could get on with the men. They never had women on that work. I was on drilling. We were told to join the union, the Tinsmiths it was, but how could we join, we were not going to do an apprenticeship...It was all very confusing... Anyway I found in the aircraft a select type of person because those men had to have a really good skill."

Kate: "Why was making aeroplanes more complicated and more important than making telephones."

"Well look at the skill there."¹³

Several important themes emerge in this comment. Firstly there is clear recognition of the traditional craft model of skill. Secondly, appropriate deference is demonstrated to such a

¹³ Interview with L.A. (b.1926) (Worked at GEC 1953-55)

workplace and to key groups of workers. Thirdly, there is a notion of the significance of being involved in the manufacture of what is perceived as a prestige product. Thirdly, in terms of the work task, working on a semi-skilled task involving 'male' machinery heightens the status of the work by comparison with the soldering tasks later undertaken at the GBC. Fourthly, the notion of a superior set of skills is also underlined for the respondent through being both invited and denied entry to the skilled union.

An explanation of this respondent's interpretation may thus be sought in the specific form of class and gender relations in the workplace which she has encountered in her work biography. It would seem plausible to suggest that this pattern of employment experience had engendered a sense of the workplace and the machinery being lent¹⁴ to the respondent, which produced a sense of deference within the male dominated workplace which constitutes a superior world built on the knowledge of the male engineer and his milieu.

Turning to the second category of women I will outline the experiences of an older respondent who had a work history in the mechanized sector of the watchmaking industry prior to joining the GBC. This respondent like the previous one shared the practical experience of doing a range of semi-skilled tasks in a machine shop environment, but gives a different interpretation to her experience. However, it should be noted that while the aircraft industry was a predominantly male industry, mechanised watch manufacture was predominantly female, and although sexually segregated many of the work processes were characteristic of much of semi-skilled work in mechanical engineering. It is in this context that the respondent's recollections must be understood:

'Of course by the time I went to the GBC I was a skilled worker. I was out of a job as a Spindle Polisher. Anyway when I got there, I soon spotted an engraving machine and said, 'Oh I see you have a Taylor Hobson Engraving Machine.' They asked me if I knew how to work it. They told me there was a lot of precision involved, that it was skilled and that I'd

¹⁴ See Cockburn 1986)

need to be careful. But it is in the nature of things that you learn. Anyway I was very competent, and it is easy work when you know how to do it. You first had to select the correct pin and it was often so fine that you had to engrave it three or four times. If you were not extremely careful you went through the label. That was one of the secrets, and what partly made it the precision work it was. And if you did not go deep enough it didn't take the point, and that is what is meant by touch just an exactness into what you are doing."

"And as you went around the beveled edges, you had to raise the pin to the beveled height, and keep it consistent. This is not unlike working on a sewing machine where you machine across a line and then you stop. And on engraving you work on a touch. Engraving is very skilled. You really need about three years to do it well, before you can get the hang of it, before you get any kind of skill, and a lot of people wouldn't make it. I was partly trained at Rotherhams you see."

Kate: "And what kind of work did you do at Rotherhams."

"I was of course a skilled worker at Rotherhams, especially after my time on the Gear Cutting. We were cutting gears for watches and clocks. I was able to cut forty eight teeth around about a piece of metal the size of a pin head, and make sure it was upright. Well you have seen the inside of a watch and have seen all it involves. There again the question of skill arises. You had to get those wheels absolutely central, and absolutely apart. I mean some were good, you had perhaps twenty four up to forty eight to cut. It depended on the size of the wheel circumference."

Kate: "Did that depend on how you loaded the machine."

"No no not at all, it wasn't the loading, it was the setting, but you had the responsibility of seeing that those teeth were in proportion and cut properly. The machine did the cutting. But if the machine was that tiny bit out, then the teeth would be out of line. And with the drilling it was done with surgical needles, so the components were very fine, very tiny. There was a lot of precision."¹³

¹³ Interview with N.M. (b.1914) (Worked at OBC 1938-44, 1955-63)

In contrast to the previous account which dwelt on the wider workplace conditions this comment is pre-occupied with the respondent's individual work, its characteristics, problems and demands. Therefore unlike the previous account it is less about power relations, and much more about the substantive features of the work. Firstly, the respondent suggests that she acquired a skill through her training and work experience in the watchmaking industry which she was able to transfer to the GEC. Secondly her discussion identifies her competences as 'skill', a claim she makes with confidence. Finally she substantiates this by locating 'skill' in precision and technical competence.

Unlike the previous account this respondent claims 'skill' based on her experience of work. Such experience includes a long work history at Rotherhams where she has acquired some transferable skills whereupon being recruited to GEC she was able to work as an engraver. That she does so I would suggest reflects the circumstances in the particular workplace in which she had worked previously, where firstly her place as a worker and her training was not contested, and where the tensions and power play evolving from gender relations were not so apparent. Therefore in this instance experience embodies the knowledge and competence to work as an engraver.

The third category of women which I will discuss are those who have some work history in other machine shop environments working alongside male colleagues on semi-skilled tasks. This will include work during the war outside the GEC, and an example which involved another respondent working at GEC in the machine shop and later on various other jobs in the predominantly women's sections. What this material suggests is that it is out of this kind of experience that women begin to question the notion of skill, as well as challenging it as a bastion of male dominance. The experience of working alongside male colleagues led the women concerned to question their exclusion from skill:

"Well I worked alongside skilled men during the war. And me I could never claim to be trained in the same way as they were. And I'll tell you something else men don't put half as much into work as we do. They don't work half as hard as women. They have one pace

and if you try and shift that they die, they just like us to feel that they are better. As for us women we try to make things nice and better. We do our best. I mean those skilled men spent time debating whether they would do this or that. And they were not the only ones to do that. The average man thinks he has done his bit if he has gone to work and clocked in. And all this about skill and what they can and cannot do. But we were able to do what they did, even though they always wanted to put it across they knew more see, maybe they did, but we could manage."¹⁶

There are a number of points underlining this comment which need elaboration. Firstly, this comment must be understood in the context of the respondent's experience of a mixed work-place where male and female workers did similar work, for such circumstances appears to encourage this sort of response. Secondly, sharing some of the work tasks and working alongside male colleagues was a revelation, which led the women into a discussion about power relations surrounding skill as opposed to an assessment of their competences based on what they actually did. Finally, this whole experience led the women to contest the conventional definition of skill. The notion of skill is reduced largely to a male game while the men concerned are visualized as *prima donnas*, who needed to be cajoled, persuaded, and appreciated.

Conveyed in the next extract is a sense of women having to accept a particular place in many such mixed work settings:

"Well I had several jobs while I was at the GBC, it was the first engineering factory I stood in, I first began in the machine shop. There were the foremen and the setters, the charge-hand, and men working various machines, and the setters, well they knew it all, and us women.... All you did really was to stand in front of a machine and feed it. You picked up each individual piece of work from a box with your left hand, and placed it in the drill, drilled it, and placed it in a box on your right side. You see that was all you did all day. You had specifications of course and different drill sizes... That's all... And then well I

¹⁶ Interview with Mrs. B. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1928-30)

worked in the wiring shop, and there it was a big change. One of the jobs I did entailed a booklet of several pages, and I was not the only one to get this kind of work, you had to follow the instructions. I mean you began by putting in all the different components into a tiny frame. This needed very fine soldering on the tips. You had to know the period of time to let the solder to flow. Of course, that wasn't given the recognition it deserved even after the unions took it up."

Kate: "How in your opinion do the two jobs compare."

"I don't think they do because not a great deal was asked from you in the machine shop except keep going, but some people liked it. But in the wiring shop the work was a lot more demanding."¹⁷

This respondent judges the work in the women's sections to be more demanding and offers a comparative description of task experience. She places the jobs in a hierarchy premised on the demands of each task, thus concluding that assembly work was more skillful than the work given to women in the machine shop. Her comment implies that the effects of power relations characteristic of a mixed workplace is the subordination of women. In this case the form subordination took was that in the mixed sections women did the least skilled work, but that even in other sections where the work was more skilled such competence did not result in any form of recognition.

Sometimes biography and the experiences of female kin are drawn upon to reinforce a challenge to the exclusive male claim to skill, and can lead to questioning the quality of such skill:

"Well I have done a lot of manual jobs. I mean I was a machinist in a sewing factory in Stafford. You know I could use those big industrial machines. The skill is that was to be fast and accurate, sounds easy doesn't it, well it wasn't. It took ages to learn, to get the hang of it. And you were not thinking I must really become an expert on this so I can turn out lovely sewing, what you thought was I must be good otherwise I'll turn out a lot of rejects, and I won't make any money. And my husband was a skilled engineer. He did an

¹⁷ Interview with R.B. (b.1929) (Worked at GBC 1949-52, 1953-66, 1980-1980)

apprenticeship and was certificated. He began at the age of sixteen or so and finished when he was twenty one. Well he was supposed to be more skilled than I was.....but there again I did all those jobs including that wiring work at the GEC. And I can tell you it could have been taught in six months, and then a lot of men's skilled jobs are to do with tradition, because their unions are strong you see....I know it to be the case. Take my mother for instance, she worked as a lathe and the men who worked alongside her had to be apprenticed. But she could do the work as well as they could that shows doesn't it, and anyway it is a question of men getting told more than us. Men know more about metal."¹⁸

Aside from offering the well versed explanation of the denial of skill to women, for example tradition and trade union strategies, this respondent adds a new twist, suggesting that women are denied particular kinds of knowledge. Against this their experiences inform them that they too had abilities which transformed them into competent workers.

Finally I will turn to the last category of women, those whose biography did not include factory employment, or whose work history was at the GEC. For the majority of such women the key to skill was through on the job experience:

"Well skill itself does not change. First skill is learning and in my time meant learning the job thoroughly. Then you had to be conscientious about doing it. Some people think they can do a job but turn out shoddy work. Skill can only be achieved by practice, it is the only way to get skill."¹⁹

The key theme underlining this comment is the stress on quality performance which can be developed through practice. Similarly the next respondent argued that her varied job experience suggested skills:

"Well the work was skilled and one job differed from the next in some way. You had to be experienced to do that whether it was through practice or apprenticeship. You couldn't take a person in from the street and say do that. They couldn't. But its experience that counts."

¹⁸ Interview with R.M. (b.1943) (Worked at GEC 1968-1972)

¹⁹ Interview with N.M. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1938-44, 1955-63)

Kate: "Can you explain a little more about experience."

"Well it helps you to know the job, get the 'know how', the 'knitty gritty' of it. I got technical skill in this way, I learned by the feel of the materials, how to know the tools and use them in the work. That's what it is, it helps you to know your job."

Kate: "Do you not think that apprenticeship is the best way of becoming skilled."

"Well in my view it was just one way of doing it, but you see I could do all that a skilled man could do, even beat him at that work. We knew more. Of course when I started there I was not skilled...but as time went on you learn. I moved around the different factories, (refers to plants), I moved from Borne Road to Spon Street, from Stoke to Helen Street. I learned a wide range of things. What does an apprentice do, they asked me to go to Middeborough, but I didn't, and teach them there, and I mean I could do the work... that work we did on the trunk radio was very demanding. You had to be meticulously accurate, precise and careful. No rejects. It wasn't everyone they let do it. We were selected. Yes you can get skill in different ways."²⁰

For this woman, then, the experience of learning a range of jobs in different settings is seen to pose a challenge to the conventional method of skill acquisition, for through a different process she too acquired skills and competences. The next respondent developed a similar assessment but questioned the whole nature of apprenticeship:

"We were not time served it is true, but my definition of apprenticeship is making tea for three years, and the rest of the time actually doing the job. Please don't think I'm being derogatory about skilled men. I mean I have three brothers who did apprenticeships, but you see most of the time is wasted. And what I'm saying is that they shouldn't be certificated for that. But lets put it like this I prefer to be born a man any day. Well I have spent most of my working life here and I can do a range of jobs as good as any man, I believe that experience is the best way ...where ..., well lets say.... I know things have

²⁰ Interview with B.E. (b.1922) (Worked as GBC 1950-1980)

changed, and now maybe the girls are supposed to be fast, but what good is a fast slovenly worker if she makes a load of scrap, you see they have got to be fast and put in a really good quality performance."²¹

Thus whilst both challenging and accepting the credibility of formalized skill training, this woman finally concludes that what matters is again a quality performance.

The arguments of these women were not unusual in the sense that for other women too 'skill' is achieved through practice, diligence and responsibility:

"Well all this lark about apprenticeships and such like. Skill in my view is about being able to do the job properly. And when it comes down to the wiring with all that precision and accuracy and detail in checking, it is a question of responsibility. You first to be able to do the work, and then sit down and do it responsibly. But there again the kind of work we did at GEC with electrics was fine and delicate, and you had to understand that. I imagine that is skill."²²

This is similar to many of the earlier comments in that skill is concerned with proficiency in performance; attainment in a particular task. However, despite the emphasis on proficient performance, such experience is almost always overshadowed by the dominant yardstick, as with the further comment from this woman:

"Well, you learned as you went along but you didn't see it as a proper training. In those days people who trained were apprentices and women did not regard themselves in this way. You see it wasn't laid out. You were shown something, and you learned it on the spot and then practiced it. Whereas, an apprenticeship was something particular, it meant you were skilled. But we did an amazing amount of different things, and if you worked alongside the skilled men in the factory you were just working but they were skilled, do you know what I mean. You were unskilled. And the funny thing is the trades unions went along with this, for them there are only two categories of worker skilled and unskilled and

²¹ Interview with L.S. (b.1929) (Worked at GEC 1955-57, 1957-84)

²² Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at GEC 1952-84)

we were not the skilled, and that's as far as it went."²³

This comment highlights a number of themes. Firstly, there is clear recognition that the experience and access to skill and training is distinctly different for men and women. Secondly, that distinction is rooted in a culture which links skill with male workers. Thirdly, this comment demonstrates the tensions between male and female workers and the implications this has for the 'experiences' of work and skill. Fourthly, in the end 'experience' achieved very little for the women, while skill was a much more active agent for their male colleagues. The contradiction was that although the women had received a form of training, they were still considered to be less skilled than male colleagues, who were acknowledged as skilled, though the women were able to work alongside them. Whilst this dilemma left many questions unresolved, equally frustrating was the trade unions attitude to this question.

While the range of different job histories was echoed in this way among the women I interviewed it was also notable that several women saw dexterity in a more self contained fashion. For these women dexterity was exclusively associated with women:

"Well I think there was a great of skill needed to do the work and especially in my time.... but we were doing that work... No doubt a man could do it, yet bearing in mind most men have butter fingers and are clumsy, and some of these very small components required a gentle touch, delicate handling, men were too tough for that, it would be seen as sissy work if you see what I mean."²⁴

Firstly, this particular discourse denotes a sexually differentiated vision of labour power. Secondly demands of the work are considered suited to the women workers for women exclusively possess such dexterities. Thirdly a key feature which qualified the work as women's work needing women's 'skills' was the size of the components. When I pressed on the issue of size another respondent developed this argument about gender difference in the following way:

²³ Interview with L.W. (h.1927) (Worked at OBC 1952-84)

²⁴ Interview with L.P. (h.1914) (Worked at OBC 1938-50)

Kate: "What about watchmakers? Women did not make the watches for example, during the craft period, it was men who made them, that was the period before the machines, do you not think that needed a delicate touch." ?

"Yes of course men made the watches, but that was different. There was precision in that and you had to be apprenticed."

Kate: "And what about boys could they manage to do the work you did. They too have relatively smaller hands, don't they."

"But boys would not have the patience that we have. And I doubt that a boy of sixteen or seventeen years would have nimble fingers, but more to the point they wouldn't have the patience."

Kate: "Ok boys don't have patience, but what about the watchmakers, I mean that work must have needed concentration don't you think "?

"That's true but there again that was in the training they were craftsmen and were trained for all of that...I think."²⁵

For this respondent patience distinguishes between male and female labour. Both genders can develop concentration, but acquire it in very different ways. Women are seen as having patience, while men learn it as part of their apprenticeship training. This in turn gives concentration and patience as competences a different value. Skill is therefore compartmentalized into fairly tight gender categories. Women's perception of male skill is as a learned process, one that is derived through apprenticeship. Although it involves human capacities common to female labour, they are transformed in the workplace in a way that female labour is not.

Such a gendered conception of dexterities did not necessarily mean an uncritical response to the established division of labour, but it did sometimes lead my informants to highlight some of the more substantive limitations of 'experience'. An example of this is provided by the following observations, which identified important links between knowledge and the effort bargain:

²⁵ Interview with B.J. (b.1926) (Worked at OBC 1941-1977)

"I mean they liked to give you a box of 'things' and 'bits' and then you had to get on with that without question. Well, I was not one to fall for that. There would be an inspector and he wouldn't use the correct name, but used a little pseudo name, catch phrases when he was with us. He'd say, I'll have a 'pot' here, and then I'd say, you mean a potentiometer. Well, I had learned it from the drawings. Then you would have the key girl come along and ask for a 'new top hat on there', what she actually meant was a transistor."

Kate: "Why were the correct terms discouraged?"

"Well I guess on the one hand that they thought that only the male engineers had brains, and of course to confuse about prices."

Kate: "Can you please elaborate a little more on that point?"

"Well, for example there were sixteen line exchangers and the bigger versions the twenty four line exchanger. Now it was not always obvious at the start which was which. But I always wanted to know so that I could compare prices, and knowing the name of the components was important so you could tell how many of this, or of that you had put in. So it depended how many components you had to deal with and some were more difficult than others. Anyway I had been doing the work in the research area before it went into production, and I had been taught a lot by the engineers. I actually knew what the components were about and how they related to each other. This kind of information is always very helpful and very much resented."

Kate: "And what were the reasons for that?"

"Well the employer had this idea that women will sit down and do things without question. Well, they sure came a cropper with me on that score. I always asked questions. And if I didn't like the job or the quality of the tools, the equipment, or indeed if the components were not of the proper quality I'd complain. I'd say I wanted proper tools. I wasn't docile, and they knew that in time, I asked a lot of questions which wasn't encouraged. Questions like 'why has this got to go like this' is greatly discouraged. And in doing that they might be denying themselves a really good method. Usually they liked you to sit there and wire.

You got girls sitting there wiring things they didn't even recognize as switches."²⁶

These comments underline the importance of being able to distinguish between the components because this was linked up with job prices, but, for the respondent this was also a wider issue. This concerned being systematically denied certain types of information which she argued were pigeon-holed in gender categories. This was not an isolated concern:

"Now for me although I knew that I had to learn and remember what I was doing, and if I didn't apply myself then I couldn't do the work. It was a job, you were made not to think about skill, another thing, the biggest irritation you were discouraged from asking questions. I mean I would have to wire from E1s to E2s, and colour codes and no one had any idea of what they were meant to represent."

Kate: "And did you inquire at all?"

"Well of course I asked the key girls but they did not know, or if they did they were not supposed to tell you. And once I was wiring really very small wiring it was. The plate was so small and took ages to complete. Anyway I wondered what it was for and I concluded that it must have been a component for a nuclear programme and they did not want us to know for some reason. Then one day, an engineer came around to fix my telephone, and I finally had my answer, I knew at least what my little plate was for. But they would not tell you what a component was for, where it went, what its proper name was. Oh yes we were kept in the dark."²⁷

In this case the respondent felt she was denied the more 'scientific' and formal information, which was evidently manipulated by male workers in a manner which corresponds closely with the pattern of male access and female subordination documented by Cockburn (1983). What was of particular significance was that -this defined narrow parameters to her own training, experience and knowledge.²⁸

²⁶ Interview with K.G. (b.1922) (Worked at OBC 1958-83)

²⁷ Interview with R.H. (b.1943) (Worked at OBC 1963-1968)

²⁸ This claim is also made by Cockburn (1983) while McNell (1987) sees a correlation between capitalist accumulation and a particular form of male expertise which has the result of marginalising women from particular sorts of knowledge, as well as glossing over the value of knowledge generated in other ways. However,

The picture which emerges out of these discussions with the women from the GEC is a complex one, involving an awareness and often an emphasis of specific competences, dexterities and skills, frustration regarding the way this was defined and rewarded, and an ambivalent recognition and questioning of male skills. In regard to the latter, especially, the views of the women tended to differ according to the pattern of their own work biographies. However, there was a widespread sense that they were trained and experienced workers -underlined by their work activities at GEC, but also sometimes outside -coupled with a recognition that their training was differently organized in ways that set them apart from apprenticed labour even while such apprenticeship itself attracted critical appraisal. For these women job experience was the key, most important, source of their skill, the foundation of their expertise. Evaluations of such expertise are grounded in biography, while at the same time that biography (including work at the GEC) remains located and assessed using the dominant conventional yardstick. Although the notion of skill is contested in the context of working alongside male colleagues, yet, the prestige attached to such a definition cannot easily be ignored.

Nevertheless, even when articulated using a stereotypical gendered discourse the appreciation of experience conveyed by these women involved several positive strands. In particular this experience is understood as the ability to perform a range of tasks, or a given task efficiently, but it also included a sense of technical competence often of a transferable sort.

For women apprenticeship meant the development of skills which lead male workers to better work and positions of power, while 'experience' involved a different process, which incorporated the development of dexterities within the confines of exclusion from certain kinds of information and allocation to the less skilled jobs. Nevertheless women often felt their work performance and competence was equal to that of their male colleagues. Competent work performance involved being continuously able to deal with difficult work. It is these aspects of their work that I will explore in the next section.

or, whilst it is true that women are marginalized and alienated in the capitalist labour process, many groups of working class men suffer too.

Job Descriptions

In this section I want to explore more fully the meaning of work in assembly through highlighting the experiences of women workers. At GBC the majority of jobs for women involve assembly work and it is regarded predominantly as women's work. It is therefore important to look at it more fully. At the same time the category of assembly work covers, and in some respects glosses over a range of complexity, techniques and tasks. Therefore I will examine a range of experiences of work tasks in assembly, as well as taking account of the sexual division of labour. In order to do this there will be references to several types of tasks/jobs and processes/techniques.

In a previous chapter I indicated some of the ways in which gender entered into the characterization of female labour, and noted that the skills and competences of these women workers were largely understood and defined in terms of the notion of dexterity. At the same time the company set up training shops for the purpose of training women manual workers at least from the late 1940s. Training and on the job experience were very clearly determinants of women's competence which constituted features of a predominantly labour intensive production process. I will discuss training as such in more detail in a later section of this chapter. Here I wish to note that the company's ambiguous position regarding training was demonstrated in a gap between company rhetoric and practice. In practice the recognition of skill is usually reflected in pay rates, but the company though it sometimes argued that the women were skilled, failed to support this by paying women appropriately. As I have shown in chapter three, for a long period the company paid female manual employees who fall within the semi-skilled category (Gluckman 1986) at rates below the unskilled rate for male labourers. This remained true from the inter-war period to the introduction of the Equal Pay Act, at which point women's pay was calculated according to the male unskilled rate, with the exception of a few women who were paid according to one of the two lowest male semi-skilled grades. Using the criterion of pay at least suggests for women workers there was very little 'skill' difference between the jobs and between the workers. In view of this I want to explore the forms of competences and 'skill' in such 'semi-skilled work' in the context of some of the tasks like platewiring and rack wiring.

Assembly was the blanket term used to describe a range of tasks which included, at specific historical periods rack wiring, platewiring, the wiring of trunk radio, bank wiring, cable forming, coilwinding and inspection. With the exception of cableforming and inspection, and less clearly rackwiring the other tasks were predominantly done by women.

There were five principal processes associated with the wiring jobs. They were paring, stripping, wiring, soldering, and dressing. These five processes characterised the labour intensive aspect of assembly work. Paring and stripping were the preparatory steps before wiring could take place, whilst dressing referred to the finishing off of the combination of a wiring and soldering process. These processes were undertaken by the women with the help of a set of simple hand operated tools which included pliers (the Loudspeaker mentions five varieties in all), cutters, stretchers, pushdrivers, screwdrivers, soldering irons, and a range of measuring instruments associated with inspection work. Coilwinding involved a machine in some ways comparable to a sewing machine which was operated by the co-ordination of hand and feet movements.

According to the women the more important facets of the work process were the wiring and soldering. In this next extract, the respondent discussed the importance, diversity and specificity of operations associated with wiring:

"Well just because everything required some type of wiring didn't necessarily make it any easier. It was a very important part of most jobs. There was always a particular way to do it, each job was different. You maybe would have to wrap the wire around once, or one and half times, but it was always necessary to meet the required specification. And it took ages to be a good wirer."³⁰

Soldering followed the wiring process. Its purpose was to seal off joints. Again, as in the previous discussion about wiring, although soldering was one of the most frequently used processes, it involved significant competences:

³⁰ Interview with B. C. (b1948) (Worked at CIBC 1963-73)

"Knowing where exactly to apply the soldering iron was the first step. The problem was in those days a lot of the wire had a kind of plastic coating. You couldn't leave too much spare wire around the joints, because that would be dangerous. And if you left the soldering iron on too long the wire just burned. So what you had to do was to very, very gently coat the wire, while using the strippers for protection, so there is a knack in holding the wire, now if you hold it too tight it splits. So really that was something that practice taught you. And you could never afford to feel uninterested, or tired, you had to concentrate, otherwise you just made waste and lost money."³¹

This comment provides an insight into some of the problems associated with a soldering process. It indicates that experience and familiarity with the tools and the materials were a necessary requirement, suggesting that the task involved a learned technique, whilst also outlining the implications of poor work performance. These examples serve to demonstrate some of the complexity associated with these work processes.

Assembly work tended to be organized in large sections further divided into sub-sections, each sub-section dealing with a task or a particular component. In each section women either worked individually at single benches divided from work colleagues by an individual bonus system; or they worked in groups as part of the "line system". Those working on single bench type operations might work on a single sub-component, for example plates, while the "line system" involved the more standardized assembly of a radio, television or telephone. There was a difference in pay between those on individual bonus schemes and those who worked on "the line." The difference was in part due to the way the bonus was constructed to reward competence associated with speed, more than competence linked to slow painstaking manipulatively demanding work. The single bench types of operations were difficult to sectionalise, were more laborious and required careful manipulation, while the line organization owed more to speed.

³¹ *ibid*

In parenthesis it should be noted that managers sometimes expressed a degree of frustration about the persistence of bench work. According to the tenets of modern management such work should have been broken down into fragmented and measured operations, but it would appear that this was not always possible. As one current senior member of the company expressed this:

"Of course we were keen to use more modern production methods, and we had our industrial engineers working on this all the time, it was sometimes not always possible to use more standardized methods, so bench work and other types of work lingered on."³²

Nevertheless benchwork was subjected to tight time schedules, which exerted pressure towards the intensification of workpace and glossed over the unforeseen problems and complexities of the work process. This is well brought out in the following reflections, which extended into a discussion of the skills involved in such work:

"Well you were supposed to be fast at the work, but you simply couldn't, I mean there was having to select the proper size strippers or whatever, you have picked up the wrong one that didn't help. Or maybe, you were using the wrong cutters, it was little use using a fine cutters on heavy wire, and it wasn't always that the tools were maintained, the cutters were not sharpened, or the tip of the soldering iron was worn, all these things made a difference to how fast and accurate you could be. But they slowed you down and the rate-fixer didn't take account of this. And it was only someone who was very good that could deal with all of that. Now take me, I was a good wirer, but for instance my friend Beryl was so much better, she never raised her head, and was so neat, she could tackle anything, but she never made a lot of money. The problem was, the work was tedious, there was so much manipulation, and you had to concentrate and keep calm. And then it was bad for the eyesight. I suffered because of it. It was at that point I had to wear glasses. And there again we had to deal with all those coloured wires."

³² Interview with Personnel Manager (h. unknown) (Worked at CIRC 1967-Present)

Kane: "How would you describe the job, was it skilled, or perhaps semi skilled?"

"In my own view you could call it skilled, well I mean it was, especially any job that fell around the wiring range. That is because when you began you knew nothing, but you learn gradually. But you gained more experience, you progressed on to the next step."³³

This comment highlights several significant themes. Firstly the respondent dwells on contradictory features of the work, which is demanding and at the same time tedious; secondly she underlines the tension between speed-up and the contingencies of problem solving in the work process, and thirdly she reveals a certain 'deference' towards fellow workers who were considered more skillful. Despite this both categories of assembly were relatively less well paid than work in the machine shop. [See chapter three]

Although such sections were predominantly female, their organization reflected characteristic forms of gender and class relations. For instance the foreman, supervisors, rate fixers were male, while most of the shop workers were women with the exception of some unskilled workers, (male labourers,) and a few men putting the finishing touches to very large completed products like 'racks', the telephone exchange systems. In the largest assembly section at the main plant, the latter were separated from the female workers by a hardboard screen.³⁴

Like the women assemblers, this particular group of men worked on the same product doing very similar work, but they were differentiated from female assemblers on the basis of a different payment system.

I will now explore some of the themes put forward by management in the legitimization of the sexual division of labour which characterized assembly work. Patience was a much valued requirement according to company personnel:

"During my time with the company, at one point we were in a position to recruit males or females for any job. We thought we didn't want to keep all our eggs in the one basket. We might put an advert in the paper and we got some boys applying. We thought why not give

³³ Interview with W. M. (b1914) (Worked at GBC 1933-36, 1941-43, 1955-66)

³⁴ Interview with Mr. B. (b.1942) (Worked at GBC 1963-1974)

them a try, and they would have a look at the job, and would say, 'Not for me,' or else they would have a go, and we would send them to the training school where they would be taught. Well, we found few would stay the run in the training school. They would say, 'No thanks.' You see it was fiddly work, and you need patience and concentration; men don't have that kind of patience, they don't sit down and knit, or sew, but it was that kind of mentality we wanted. Another reason was that although our work was complicated it was also monotonous, and girls could do that. They would sit there chattering to each other while doing the work. Now you get boys or men, and you find they want a little more to stretch themselves, and I'm not being discouraging to females, I love 'em."³⁵

Another former member of middle management agreed with this. Though in terser language, he is operating within a similar repertoire of gender stereotypes:

"Yes we found the girls were better, could do tedious work that needed a lot of care in dealing with those small parts, and putting on the solder."³⁶

Such managers indicate some of the ways in which jobs and competences were constructed as gender specific.³⁷ Women were assumed to have patience to take care in the execution work that was defined as 'fiddly' and monotonous, and this was rationalised as a result of a combination of the women's training in domestic skills and their propensity for "chattering". By contrast young male workers lacked patience and required more stimulating work. One major contradiction in management's rationalisation of gender divisions was that, while some women may have very specific domestic competences, the company placed considerable emphasis on training and job experience and this is an issue I will consider later in this chapter.

Other themes in the legitimisation of a gendered division of labour emerged in discussions of another task, rackwiring, which was performed on a bigger component, which formed part of telephone exchange systems. In discussions with the women I interviewed, (some of whom had

³⁵ Interview with Retired Personnel Manager (b.1923) (Worked at GEC 1937-1984)

³⁶ Interview with Retired Works Manager (b.1913) (Worked at GEC 1927-1977)

³⁷ I am not sure what the company tried male labour on the wiring work, though Chamberman (1977) suggests that this may have been done.

been with the GEC for the whole of the post-war years even from the 1930's) many argued that they were able to perform all the jobs associated with rackwiring. However, a male supervisor I interviewed who began work on the assembly section in Stoke in 1963, claimed that in his experience there was a gendered division of labour even within rackwiring, with men completing some of the work on the overall component. This provided an opportunity for me to press for further elaboration of this man's conception of the differences between men's and women's work at GEC and thus produced the following commentary:

"I began work as a tester. I worked in a corner of the shop, so I was able to observe the job reservation for men."

Kate: "What was the reason for that?"

"My impression was that the dividing line was between whether or not the wiring included the reading and interpreting of drawings, whereas the women used 'notes'. The women's work was more routine, and men got the jobs where there was an interpretation of plans."

Kate: "So what is the difference between notes and blueprints?"

"The blueprints the women were allowed to read were for plates, the sub-unit which went into the rack, or whatever, it was smaller, and women were regarded as more nimble fingered, and were able to deal with it, whereas the work the men did was to co-ordinate the more complex drawings relating to the overall rack. So you see it was a bit of intelligence and strength."

Kate: "Which was it intelligence, or strength?"

"Looking at it retrospectively it must have been strength because the men had no extra training."

Kate: "Women I have talked to told me they too interpreted 'blueprints' are we talking about something different from what the men did?"

"Ah yes, what the women were allowed to interpret were 'blueprints for plates', the commodities which are now printed circuits, but the moment you move from an plate, or unit to working on a huge rack...the rack was a huge unit twelve foot high by four or five foot

wide....then at this point you move on to men. That was because it was a physical thing, difference I mean."

Kate: "Well, that is interesting because women gave me quite graphic accounts of how they managed to work on these large components also."

"Yes but they would have been wiring the sub-units within the rack, they wired the multiple selectors, its like connecting tag A to tab B, and the justification for them wiring that was that they were working on the smaller sub-components; and there again they were regarded as more nimble fingered and were able to deal with it."

Kate: "Did the men who did the wiring on the more completed racks have an apprentice training in electrical engineering, how was their training and expertise different from women?"

"No they learned from an informal adult training."

Kate: "You mean they learned mainly through on the job training like the women?"

"Yes."

Kate: "So why was there a difference between the work the men and women did?"

"Apart from the rationale of women being more nimble fingered, and being capable of doing closer work; and men being physically stronger, I feel sure that was the reason. The men were no brighter than the women, yet somewhere along the line there was the assumption which said there was a difference between the blueprints for plates, as opposed to the blueprints for racks."

Kate: "Can you remember what grades the men were on as opposed to the women?"

"Most men were salaried, and the women were checkworkers (hourly paid). Now as far as grading for the women was concerned, there was a key girl getting more money and that was about it. I should imagine the others were all the same."³⁸

³⁸ Interview with Mr. B. (b.19342) (Worked at CIBC 1963-1974)

According to this account the sexual division of labour was based on a combination of differences, including technical competence, strength, and different payment systems. However, the discussion casts doubt that there was a significant distinction in technical competence between the men's and the women's work, a point the informant finally conceded. Certainly the evidence in this account is consistent with the point made on pay in chapters three and four, namely that women were paid through a different payment system from the men: it seems likely the men were 'staff', on a set pay scale, while the women were on bonuses. Furthermore although I do not have the relevant pay data, it appears likely that this difference would have made comparisons difficult, making pay differences opaque.

The rather shifting ground of the legitimization of gender divisions revealed by this exchange suggests that, as has been demonstrated in such other studies of gendering of jobs as Phillips and Taylor (1986) and Cockburn (1983, 1986) a variety of highly problematical and often superficial distinctions were drawn in comparisons of jobs made to explain or justify the existing sexual division of waged labour.

In the remainder of this section I will focus on how the women themselves interpreted such themes as experience, dexterity, patience and skill. In doing so I will refer back to the criteria and stereotypes highlighted by male managers and supervisors, and raise further queries about the practical basis as well as the coherence of these judgements. This will take account of the women's own experiences in performing such jobs as platewiring and rackwiring

Using my interview material I will begin with a description of platewiring offered by one of the older cohort of women:

"You see with platewiring, you were first given a card with a lot of holes in it. Of course you had a drawing which had a set of instructions on it. You were given all your components which had functions. The first thing you did was to check to see where these components were supposed to go. You might have a tiny brown component with a yellow stripe, or maybe a large red one. Sometimes you got brown ones that were similar, the only difference was the size. Once slotted on to a plate, getting the tiny ones through the holes

and securing them in the correct manner was the most vital. They were held at the back by a kind of cushion pin, you screwed it on, turned it over, and clipped it off. Soldering followed, again it was important to apply the correct amount of solder, not too much, not too little. It was important to cover all the wire, if you hadn't done this, it would short circuit, which meant that one wire was touching the other. I used to think they were being fussy, but they had to be a certain shape and size to ensure there were no plucks in them."

Kate: "Did you enjoy the work?"

"Well no, not at all but it was a job, and we made fun of it. It was so frustrating. They say we are passive, and if we had been it would be better, then you could sit there and work. Maybe, the sort of women who liked sewing might like it, and be better at it. Well, there were a lot of women who couldn't cope, and they were sent to do the packing, or something else."³⁹

This account identified the more important competences necessary to do the job. They included, the correct reading of the job specification, the correct identification of connection points, and precision in both the wiring process and the application of solder. Alongside this the respondent implied that perhaps the work was gender specific in the sense that some women possessed relevant domestic craft based skills, but she also suggested that there was an ongoing selection process weeding out those who did not meet expectations, who were then relegated to an unskilled job. One of the more important themes to emerge out of this discussion was that the emergent contingencies associated with the job demanded a range of personal competences from the women. The demands were more linked to dealing with complex carefully worked out manipulative problems, which made a speedy performance impossible.

In the next excerpt a younger woman explained some the problems she encountered when she was working on platwiring:

³⁹ Interview with B.B. (b.1922) (Worked at GBC 1950s-1962)

"The first thing you did was to set the job out on blocks and strip them down. Then it was time to look at your plan or set of instructions and might begin from line A, to perhaps B2, the next step following careful tracing the path you would connect up those wires and solder them and secure them. On the other hand, you may get an instruction which required connection from fourth from the end to the sixteenth from the end. Now to do that may sound simple, yet some of it was difficult, because for a start the soldering irons were old and clumsy. You would have to get up off your seat to reach the very awkward angles, for example, it was a bit like embroidery, in that you were following patterns and making shapes. Well, I never liked anything like that I can tell you, sitting like that would drive me mad. But then I never did it, nor did I have any desire to do anything like it. But I feel sure if you could sit there and do embroidery or something like it, you would be better off. Maybe that is why they employed so many of us women, especially the married ones, they are more patient. Well I mean if you liked crochet and sitting down to do tedious things then you might like that also. You had to be careful to link everything up properly. I mean you repeated several processes, but each one could be different. And I mean you just did not sit there and do the thing automatically, you had to consult your plan. And when the whole thing was wired up you wondered how you did it."

Kate: "Did you enjoy that kind of work?"

"Oh, not at all, I hated it, it was far too fiddly. And then if you made a mistake, which you failed to notice until the end of the job, it meant a really painstaking task of getting the solder off, and redoing it. And then we were on piecework, so our mistakes were at our own expense, because the flat rate was rock bottom, and it was impossible to earn a bonus on that work anyway."

Kate: "Can you explain how you removed the dried solder?"

"Well the art was to melt it and then drain it off. Sometimes of course it ruined the wire. They told us the components were very expensive and would be furious if we destroyed one."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Interview with B.M. (b. 1944) (Worked at CBC 63-68)

This discussion like the previous account, vividly conveyed a clear recognition of the demands of the work, but at the same time captured the contradictory assumptions being made about women's labour power. The demands included patience, concentration, the ability to follow 'blue-prints', and competence in the use of a soldering iron. Alongside this there was variation in the work, because plates formed components for most of the products. However, both variation and having to deal with emergent contingencies had the effect of slowing down the pace of work, and it was speed that the company appeared to reward, although they implicitly acknowledged that the work could not always be performed in this manner. This type of circumstance provided the opportunity to develop personal competence in dealing with difficult components and complex task manipulations.

Furthermore, both of these women recognized and recounted the identification of features of domesticated femininity, for instance, sewing and embroidery- with aspects of the work process, but they did so in such a manner as to distance themselves, and by implication many other women, from any experience of easy correspondence between domestic and workplace competences. In particular they repudiated at least for themselves, any self-conception built around docile domestic dexterity or its transference into the world of work.

Perhaps these remarks reveal the ubiquitous influence of this repertoire of meanings associated with domestic needle-craft which was appealed to explicitly by the retired personnel manager to justify the division of labour, but at the same time they underline the extent to which many women workers at the OBC were ambivalent or actively critical of such stereotypes being applied to themselves.

In the next extract, another woman expressed rather more positive job satisfaction in giving a detailed account of the techniques involved:

"Well the second job I did I think was platewiring. I'm not sure if that is what it was called, but there were lots of capacitors, and resistors. I had moved to the next shop for that. They always kept the most difficult jobs for me. Yes I think it was another version of the platewiring. I liked it very much. I had a massive print, loads of resistors, capacitors. It

consisted of wiring, soldering, linking up. You started by consulting the print. I found that fascinating, you then chose the resistors, selected their location and fitted them in, and tightened them up. They fitted in a particular way, forming a pattern and you were building something. Now it was necessary to get each stage ok. It was like creating something, you watched it grow, you could never believe that so many pieces could be fitted into such a small space. I found it interesting. You couldn't believe such a big print could be combined in the small box in the end, yes it was really great."

Kate: "And can you say a little more about why enjoyed it?"

"Well, after years of experience I was good, very good, I could do it, no problem. I was able to use all sorts of tools, pliers, cutters, stretchers, posidrivs, screwdrivers, you see I could use them all."⁴¹

What this woman described was confidence and competence in her work. For her this particular work was a creative activity, which stemmed both from her personal performance, and from the completion of the finished product.

Before looking in more detail at women's perspectives on rackwiring one preliminary point needs to be made. As I have indicated in my introduction to the supervisors comments, the women I talked to had a different recollection of the gender divisions involved: none of them ever mentioned male rackwires, while they themselves worked not only on the racks but also on the banks and the overall racks. While this does not rule out the existence of long standing, but limited, differences between male and female tasks in this area, it may suggest that men were introduced into this area only relatively late. I will now describe the women's experiences of the work on rackwiring. Like many of the women talking about rackwiring this respondent recounts many of the problems encountered in this sort of work:

"Well, I did two jobs at GBC rack wiring and inspection, and in my view they were both skilled but the rack wiring was by far more complicated. It was part of the wiring of a

⁴¹ Interview with R.B. (b. 1920) (Worked at GBC 1947-51, 1952-75)

telephone. It was very complicated work. You had to use a ladder. That took you to the top of the job, where you began. You were then standing facing the top of the rack. You first consulted the blueprint. On the rack itself there were many coloured wires, it was part of the job to follow the instructions closely in order to be able to connect the wires. There was a great deal of variation in that work. Telephones were made according to specifications for different countries. Once you had identified the correct pattern and secured a row of wires, then you applied the solder. The technique was to know how to apply just the correct amount of solder and get a neat finish. It was no good having big blobs that could cause interference and damage the finished product. Then you came to the next row of wires and so on. But there again it might be a different thickness of wire and you began all over again."

Kate: "And for what reason in your opinion was the work skilled?"

"Well you had to know a lot about how to put the component together and you had to know about the materials. Not only this you had the responsibility of clearing it. I mean if you passed it and it was faulty, and too many went into circulation, the GEC's reputation was on the line. You simply had to know what you were doing."⁴²

Three themes underline this account of rackwiring: attention to performance, a sense of responsibility for the quality of the product, and an awareness that the company's reputation rested on the latter. This showed that such women had pride in their work and skills, and a sense that these were embodied into the quality of the product and affected the company's reputation.

Similar features were evident in discussions of bankwiring, a process similar to rackwiring:

"Bank Wiring, well this was a piece of equipment used in the telephone exchange. It consisted of a big frame which was known as a bank because it held so many pieces of wires. Usually there were about ten rows altogether. Well you began by dressing the wires. I should say it took about a week in all to do this. It was really a big job, and you had to be

⁴² Interview with H.B. (b.1935) (Worked at GEC 1960-83)

precise and accurate. You had charts and instructions. There was the joining of the armatures. It took another week to connect all the wires at the side of the bank. There were five vertical and five horizontal rows of wire. And that was ten banks, and it was all steel. You also had to attach the relays and the tailings. Now to do this it was necessary to hook your arm around the side of the set, and there was an art in that not everyone could do it. You had to be able to tie the wires together. Now there was no way you could speed that kind of thing up."⁴³

Once more, this discussion hinges upon the demands characteristic of a particular complex task; which include the need to refer to charts, to be attentive to instructions, and systematically following the job through to completion. It should also be noted that this respondent like the earlier one remarked that, although it was speed which was rewarded, what was demanded from the task was careful and accurate performance.

In conclusion these women concerned conveyed a sense of 'skill' embodied in their tasks and activities, where personal competences were developed in the experience of such work, thus incorporated into the products they were helping to produce, whilst in important respects challenging the gendered stereotypical image of such competences offered by the management.

⁴³ Interview with W.M. (n.1914) (Worked at CBC 1933-36, 1941-43, 1955-66)

Training Programmes

In the last section I attempted to give the reader some insight into the complexity of work tasks, as well as focusing on the sexual division of labour. In this section I will be examining the role of training and job experience. A number of different sources will be drawn upon, and they include interview material from management personnel, documentary evidence, and women's perceptions of training. On the basis of these sources I will seek to demonstrate the purpose and nature of training. What emerges out of this discussion supports the themes in the earlier sections where women argued that the work was complex and required a certain expertise.

Training was considered a crucial requirement in the organization of work at GBC. According to a former member of the personnel department, it was not until after the war that training schools became part of established policy:

"We started the training schools somewhere after the war, I mean when I began as an apprentice it was a question of 'airing by Nellie', but there was a shift to a more formalized system. When I started as an apprentice, I was sent to a skilled man, and he was on piece-work, he showed me once and then said, 'By the way I'm a busy bloke, don't bother me again'. So you made your own way. And in my view whether its hourly paid, or apprentices a systematic form of training has got to be better."⁴⁵

I will first explore the purpose and nature of training and its relationship to skill. My evidence suggests that training programmes encompassed four interlocking themes. They involved the screening of personnel, the matching of labour to jobs, the passing on of techniques and skills geared towards productivity, and linked to the latter techniques which were geared towards accuracy and speed.

The GBC had its own training shops in each plant. Personnel for the training workshops were recruited from three sources: experienced workers, first line supervision and through the identification of exemplary workers during initial training.

⁴⁵ Interview with Elizabeth [redacted] (b.1921) (Worked at GBC 1937-1984)

The pattern of selecting and utilising experienced workers and appointing them as tutors in the training shop remained consistent throughout the period under investigation. Both the Loudspeaker and the interview material confirm this practice. A former personnel manager whose main task was the recruitment of manual workers explained why it was done:

"Our personnel for the training workshop came from the shop floor. That was the best method, we got people who knew the problems associated with the work inside out."⁴⁶

The Works Manager from the same plant elaborated the point from his own distinctive angle:

"But you see they (Training Personnel) borrowed the cream of the crop. Our skilled women were sifted out and taken on as instructors, so for instance, the best adjusters were taken out and turned into instructors."⁴⁷

This pattern of selection was also very much endorsed in the Loudspeaker:

"One of the most experienced members of the Relay Section is Miss Smith. She joined the section in 1924. She began work on assembly and adjusting operations until 1931, when she was transferred to the wiring shop. There Miss Smith concentrated on adjustment work only, an operation calling for considerable skill and experience in the setting of springs, and the measurement of tension. Her abilities in this direction may be judged from the fact that she recently took charge of a learners class in which new employees received preliminary training before taking their places at the production benches."⁴⁸

Similar evidence suggests that the same process remained very much in existence after the

WAC:

"The push button switch had been added, so we contented ourselves with watching the operators. We stopped for a few words with Miss Ethel Hobley, who after ten years experience acts as a tutor to those who have just been trained and who are less experienced."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Interview With Retired Personnel Manager (h.1923) (Worked at GEC 1937-1984)

⁴⁷ Interview with Retired Works Manager (h.1913) (Worked at 1927-1977)

⁴⁸ The Loudspeaker, Dec. 1936 P.4

⁴⁹ The Loudspeaker, March, 1948 p31

Selecting skilled and experienced women workers and 'promoting' them to positions of supervision, while at the same time marginalising them by failing to make substantial financial improvements (a point documented in chaps three and four), as well as the imposition of gendered identities (see also chap five) was a well established managerial practice throughout the period under examination.

I will now examine more closely the aims and quality of the training programmes. Female hourly paid workers received initial instruction organized exclusively by the employers, and they were denied access to any external formal structure such as local colleges. The absence of involvement of the local education structure seems likely to have reinforced the process whereby, although women were trained, their competences gained only rudimentary recognition and were never formally recognized.

Once the training school was established after the war the time spent there varied. According to the interview material:

"Well they stayed in the training school on average for twelve weeks, it could be considerably longer, it depended on the jobs they were to do, and the skill of the pupil involved."⁵⁰

There were some jobs like platewiring (discussed in an earlier section) which the company considered to be rather more skilled, and subsequently required a longer period of training. For example the Loudspeaker noted that:

"The training of a platewired is a comparatively lengthy task, taking about nine months in all. The first six weeks are spent learning the rudiments of stripping wires and how to push wire through the hole in the correct tag in the approved manner. Many of the girls have no previous experience of this type of work and consequently must be taught from the beginning. When they are sufficiently proficient to work on the benches, the trainees leave the beginners class and start wiring the simpler plates, usually relay plates. After gaining experience on these simple plates, they progress to the more difficult Strougher 2000 type

⁵⁰ Interview with Works Manager (h.1913) (Worked at GBC 1927-1964)

plates, where the tags are not so easily accessible. In some of the more complex work processes, prior to the assembly operations careful attention is needed which involves complicated 'blue prints' and in such cases training was much longer often extending to more than nine months.⁵¹

In this and other accounts complexity and variation were identified as the reasons for the longer training requirement:

"The wiring of a plate may take anything from twenty minutes to three or four days. The number of different wires varies from eight to eight hundred. This method of wiring is standard, and that is the reason why we instructors are employed. We teach a uniform method, but for each type of plate, the application of the method is different, and that is one of the reasons why so much time is required to train a skilled wire.⁵²

This comment makes two important points in respect of skill and training. Although the general principle underlying the method was standardization, this was not always possible because there were many varieties of the product. In this context 'skill' was embodied in the complexity and variety of work involved in the application of platewiring, and as I have stressed in an earlier section the women workers themselves also identified both these aspects of complexity and variation in their discussions of the work. Secondly, training was a necessary precondition in helping the operatives to grasp and cope with the complexity of the process, and the variety of operations.

Another important aspect of this initial training period was that it was very much a screening process when trainees were graded according to their skills and matched to jobs. Again the Loudspeaker acknowledges this:

"We know within the first six weeks from the way she handled the pliers, whether she is going to take to this kind of work. If they are not shaping we know what to do with them."⁵³

⁵¹ The Loudspeaker, July 1947

⁵² The Loudspeaker, July 1948

⁵³ The Loudspeaker, February 1948 P31

Furthermore this approach was endorsed by the members of personnel management:

"Well in the training school the selection was done. Say T.. (referring to retired Works Manager) wanted me to recruit some people for relay adjusting. Some you would recruit were not suitable for whatever reason. And if there was another requirement of a less or different skill in another department then they would get the opportunity of doing that."⁵⁴

Thus continuous assessment was part and parcel of selection, and sometimes meant that particular workers were being prepared for more complex work.

Against this background the end of the period in the training school had relevance in two ways. In reality it was the end of only the first and certainly incomplete stage of the training process: the next step would occur on the job. From this point of view, and for the employers, this was simply a stage in the training. However, in contrast to this, among the women it was interpreted as the end of the training, because they were no longer designated trainees but were workers. This had quite an important influence on the way women perceived their training. Subjectively it did not help them to perceive themselves as developing or possessing skills, nor indeed that they were still training. Nevertheless the reality was that training was to continue on the basis of self help, where the onus for developing and demonstrating expertise was shouldered by the women.

From the company perspective the second stage of training on the job, involved detailed supervision and the use of instruction charts and pictures. This method was assumed to enable trainees to check their own work as indicated in the report that:

"The stand holding the photos are portable and you will see girls who have not been with us very long checking a print to ensure that their work is correct."⁵⁵

My discussions with women workers showed that expertise was clearly a prior requirement in the work performance. This comment shows that the onus was on the trainees to perform accurately. Training was tied in with productivity, as much as it was about imparting skills.

⁵⁴ Interview with Retired Personnel Manager (b.1923) (Worked at GBC 1937-84) 1989.

⁵⁵ The *Londoner*, April, 1948

Indeed the skills were oriented to productivity:

"A feature of this section is of course that each girl receives an individual bonus, there not being any group or system of collective bonuses. Owing to the long time required to train a girl to become an efficient wirer there is too a system which applies only to platewired, and not to any other members of the department under which trainees are able to earn a bonus before they have completed their nine months training. Another interesting point is that all the operatives in this department are productive, and therefore there is no wastage of material during the period."⁵⁶

A number of important issues were raised in this extract, concerning both the length of training, and the notion of productivity. Despite the claims it makes, the women trainees I interviewed found it impossible to earn bonuses. This may help to explain why work was organized in this way. Not only was it cost effective in that the workers in effect paid for their own training, but furthermore this payment system injected ambiguity about any conception of skill because incentive payments did not explicitly distinguish them from other workers. Conventionally increases in pay rates signify levels of skill and expertise, but for these women the size of the bonus was the only, and ambiguous recognition of their competence. Some of the ramifications of this arrangement are revealed by the following interview comments:

"Well, you see at first I just wasn't quick, I mean I couldn't do it."

Kate: "Why was it not possible for you to earn a bonus?"

"Well let me tell you, lets take one part of the job, point to point wiring. This is where you got a piece of wire, and you looked up the drawing to see where it was supposed to go. Sometimes it was supposed to go from tag to tag. Very thin wires like hair you'd get, twenty five gauge which was thick almost an eighth of an inch thick, you also got crag wire which was the sort of thing you got in L.v. serials so you had to be able to deal with different types of wire, you also had stranded wire when you stripped off an outside cover. You may

⁵⁶ The *Loudspeaker* July 1948

have to deal with from seven to fourteen wires. It depended on what was needed at any given time, and you would have to know how to deal with it."

Kate: "And what would the latter aspects involve, I mean are you talking about one job?"

"Just one, and then there were the tools, you see, I mean pliers and cutters. You used fine cutters for fine wires, and heavy cutters for heavy wires. And then strippers which were used to strip the covering off the wire and soldering irons. You have the part which is the bit for different types of wire. The idea is you got more heat in some than others, and you would have to know all that to do the job. I mean this sort of experience is knowledge you got in your head. Of course you must learn it. It was afterwards a kind of 'folk' (accumulated knowledge) and you kept it in you head, but as I say it was got out of doing the job. Now you didn't get a proper training to tell you all these things, which should really be covered in the training. So earning a bonus before you were trained was impossible, but you still felt bad because you didn't know when you were trained."⁵⁷

This comment highlights several important features. Firstly consistent with my earlier discussion it showed that the work tasks were complicated and required instruction and practice. If the purpose of training had been to prepare the women to work speedily, then this had not been achieved from the women's perspective. Secondly it showed that productivity may be the overarching purpose, there were other competing priorities in work which required accuracy and care. Workers were encouraged to work at their own pace, so that quality as opposed to speed was perhaps more important in such instances, but the piecework system failed to reward this. Thirdly, it showed the kind of meaning the women workers give training. The women argued that the initial training period failed to convey the nuances and the complexity of the work. Learning the basic skills in the use of a soldering iron was one stage, but being capable of applying this process in situation offering a variety of demands was something that could only be gained through on the job experience. This point is further endorsed by another respondent:

⁵⁷ Interview with K.G. (b.1922) (Worked at GBC 1958-83)

"Well let us say there are some basics when you start to learn soldering, and the very first thing is that you don't burn yourself and drop hot solder. The second thing is a steady hand. And there again you had to know how long to leave the solder, what I meant is you couldn't leave great ugly wallops of solder slapped on, no that's not how it's done. And there again you could easily frazzle (burn) the component. Now you wouldn't come out of the training shop knowing all that, if you see what I mean. And you couldn't be fast until you knew all that... see..."⁵⁸

The processes of formal and informal training therefore formed on a combination of speed and dexterity. Not only was the training designed to impart techniques, but the firm appeared to be equally keen to identify really fast dexterous workers, who would then set the pace, and become the trendsetters for other workers. Such features were pinpointed by one such pace setter:

"I went into the training school for eight weeks in the beginning. Well of course, I didn't have a clue, but they taught you everything, the basic ideas, the difference and the importance of the different types of wires, the function and the way to use the soldering iron, all about solder, the way to use it on different kinds of joints, what was expected of you, to read blueprints, and the consequences of sloppy work. Then you did a test, they tested you, and it was then you were told about your suitability for the work. People were not sacked, but given a job that suited them. Anyway I was excellent, I mean at wiring. I did several jobs, all kinds. They then started the twilight shift, and the girls who were on it swore they could not do more than a few of these jobs I think it was four in a shift. Anyway I could do seven. So to prove to the girls it could be done and it was the best paying job, they asked me to come back four evenings a week, they did not arrange a lift or anything. I had to come in on the bus and do a demonstration and manage this and my full time job. Well, it was bad and there was no foreman or anyone around, well they wouldn't get one for four hours each night temporarily. And of course there was no lift. Then on top of that I went

⁵⁸ Interview with R.B. (b.1920) (Worked at GBC 1947-51, 1952-73)

twice at the weekends, me just an ordinary worker doing all that. And would you believe it, it was just classed as overtime. But I organized that shift. It went well. I would rush home at five-thirty and rush off again. You see I was out of the house at six-thirty in the morning and wouldn't get back until after ten o'clock at night, well it was like that."⁵⁹

Such exemplary workers were the pacemakers in productivity, but while their 'skills' proved to be critical for productivity they were only reorganized in the gain of speed. Screening detected the most impressive workers, whose standards set a precedent for the shop floor. This example suggests that the screening of workers' potential during training involved not only the identification and development of particular skills, abilities and dexterities, but also the selection of those workers identified as capable of passing on these skills. I make this distinction, because, technical expertise alone would not be a sufficient criterion for such activities as the successful setting up of a work shift, and the smooth running of that operation. Other qualities encapsulated in abilities like communication, the passing on of knowledge and also some skills in organization and delegation were essential. Women workers who the company considered possessed such qualities were often invited to set up shifts, or take on the role of trainers. This pattern of labour utilization was not formally acknowledged in the job structure. The comment of this interviewee also shows that she realizes the cavalier fashion in which it was assumed she would carry out this project. She knows that the company has taken her for granted and resentment is echoed throughout her comment. This stemmed both from being asked to carry out an extraordinary task, that of setting up a shift, while her status and economic rewards stress that she is just "an ordinary worker", and from the fact that she was cast as the model for greater productivity.

By the time the learners were out of the "school", and commenced the second stage of "on the job training" they began to encounter the practical difficulties associated with the work. Complicated work tasks were learned through trial and error which given the workings of the bonus scheme was at the expense of the workers.

⁵⁹ Interview with B.C. (b.1948) (Worked at OBC 1962-72)

This pattern of training had not significantly altered despite the attempts at rationalisation by the beginning of the 1960s. The route to 'skill' was still not an easy one, as the following respondent recalls,

"Well not everyone could stand it, I mean once you left the training school you were tried out on different jobs, but they couldn't tell you this. They really weeded people out. And of course the less complicated jobs were not at all the worst, because you had the chance of earning your money. When I finished in the training school, I mean I was considered good, I was given a job on the plate wiring. But you see you were not there to do beautiful work, or to make a beautiful thing, you were there to earn money. And it was such irritating work, I mean you couldn't talk, you had to concentrate so much, you never could relax, but on the other hand the job was not interesting enough to interest you, yet it called for the concentration of a really interesting job. And you always had to check what you were doing. And you had to be very good, I mean tidy well finished work."⁶⁰

This comment raised a number of important themes. Firstly, consistent with the remarks of the earlier women, this comment showed that screening remained an important feature of training. In some ways what was happening was not so much a process of training, although this was also relevant, as much as the identification of aspects of skill, and subsequent job matching. Secondly it showed that the ultimate goal of training for women was productivity tied up in the bonus system. Thirdly it draws out the contradictions in the way the work was organized set against the productivity goal. Essentially what this comment showed was that the particular competences of the work tasks were not compatible with the organisation of work on the principles of mass production. Moreover the ideology legitimising productivity influenced the respondent's view of the work, and the training. She expected factory work to be undemanding and more economically rewarding. She did not expect intrinsic job satisfaction because in her view the work was just factory work. Her perceptions of the demands of the work very much contrasted with realities of the work.

⁶⁰ Interview with R.H. (b.1944) (Worked at GBC 1963-68)

That reality was that the work needed concentration which would involve the worker in a closer understanding with the process, essentially a cooperative attitude encapsulating a set of dexterities and competences embodied in co-ordinated hand and eye movements using simple tools on various types of materials, all of which demanded considerable concentration whilst offering little intrinsic satisfaction.

The problem was that women held ambiguous views about the work, on the one hand seeing it as unskilled work while at the same time arguing that it was far from simple work. They also linked unskilled work with high productivity. But this could not be achieved because of the constraints of the bonus system and the demands of the work. To some of the younger women it was inconceivable that mere factory work required such levels of personal absorption. The heavy reliance on the bonus system meant that it formed part of the system of control imposing productivity. This argument is well borne out in the following account:

"Since about 1970 or perhaps the introduction of the Equal Pay Act all our wage increases have gone on the flat rate, with the result that the bonus is not as important as it used to be. I mean at one time you might have seen someone with a forty pounds bonus and sixteen pound flat rate. Well that now has turned, today the bonus can be important, but shouldn't form more than twenty five per cent or at the most thirty per cent of the whole wage. Prior to 1974, the bonus could constitute about two thirds of the wage, but then most people could not do that."⁶¹

This evidence viewed against the previous extracts provides some insights into the demands made by the bonus system, which also must be seen as an indication of how poorly paid the trainees were. Once out of the training school the 'real' training took place and was acquired through long periods of on the job experience. Custom and practice and reference to experienced workers provided the frame of reference.

⁶¹ Interview with L.S. (b.1928) (Worked at GBC 1955-57, 1957-84)

This point was vividly expressed in the following excerpt:

"Most people were trained at some point, well, for example, if they started a new job then you were taken in to the training school. At first, (refers to the late 1940's and early 1950's) it was training for all kinds of wiring work. Then later they did the colour and dexterity tests. Anyway most of what they taught you was useless.... It was only the very basis of anything and then it was the long way around which was impossible to make any money on. As soon as you got down to the shop somebody would tell you, don't do it like that you'll never get anywhere. No you couldn't come out of training and expect to go on piece-work and make money... the idea was to find your own method."⁶²

Other respondents too agreed that training failed to teach them the most efficient techniques, for instance:

"In the training school they showed you how to do the basic techniques and gave you samples to do. I was given some gigs to wire and solder and dress. The thing about the training school they taught you the longest and slowest way. Once you out into the shop if the girls liked you they would say, 'Forget everything they have told you and do it this way. It was usually quicker.'⁶³

While another respondent explained that the real training took place on the shop floor based on the advice from long experienced colleagues:

"I mean when I came out of the training school, they teach you a lot of rules like, and not much else, anyway old Doris was a nifty worker knew how to cut the corners, cover the mistakes and could do a bit of peach work. She always, 'Never mind what the bosses tell you they don't know anything, but it gives them a job' Now she showed us how not to get your iron in a mess, for instance, when to clean it and how to make clean stripping. She could do all that"⁶⁴

⁶² Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at GBC 1952-84)

⁶³ Interview with T.A. (b.1923) (Worked at GBC 1941-46)

⁶⁴ Interview with S.O. (b.1945) (Worked at GBC 1961-74)

The importance of these extracts are that they show that women had developed a system of custom and practice which were set to curb the excesses of the bonus system. Nevertheless new graduates found that long periods of 'on the job experience could only marginally solve the problem.

The value placed on training by many of the respondents was finding out how not to do the work. The real training for productivity took place on the shop floor, the tactic of cutting corners was discovered. Training to acquire a skill as an end in itself was of secondary importance. Most of the women thought that training and skill ought to embody the technique of acquiring speed. Training schemes paled into insignificance set against the practice and diversification of tasks on the shop floor. Women felt that this was of much more benefit as a way of improving their own labour power. Instances where women do regard themselves as skilled arise out of the experience of successfully undertaking particular tasks especially complex manual wiring work acknowledged in a form of promotion, albeit limited. However several factors coexisted within the organisation of work which greatly militated against women defining themselves as skilled.

Experience, Job Differentiation and 'Promotion'

In this section I want to use my material to explore the relationships of training and job experience to job differentiation and 'promotion'. Work experience was the second most important facet of training and the women relied on it to gain expertise. Equally managers recognized that the company relied on the most experienced workers:

"Well it's like this, anywhere some people were worth their weight in gold and could do any job, and that's valued but only in rhetoric, no matter how good they were, there simply was, as I said before nowhere to move to upwards."⁶⁴

This informant noted that although the company was dependent on the versatility of experienced workers, they were not formally⁶⁵ distinguished in a promotion structure. This point was also confirmed by other managers:

"Well you see we had many 'gems', we looked out for them, the top of the cream so to speak, and we'd use them as instructors, or whatever, we'd always be on the look-out, and many could turn their hands to any job within reason"⁶⁶

This comment shows that the company practiced an informal system of grading, a point which again emerged in a discussion on pay:

Kate: "How were they differentiated in terms of pay."

"You are talking now about the 'girls'. No they were all the same, we liked it like that; but the subtlety of it all was the girls were on piecework. Now they were in a piecework situation and those that had those skills that we wanted were more important obviously, and usually managed to earn more money, and I'm not going into any detail how, but with a little

⁶⁴ Interview with S.W. (b.1940) (Worked at GBC 1960s)

⁶⁵ Formal within the framework of this study refers to instances where women had the opportunity of competing and securing work in the company job ladder, which was essentially male, and began with first line management. It should be noted that this provided only very minimal opportunities for women's upward mobility, which was restricted to the post of 'key girl'. Such women were paid according to day rates. There were other forms of job differentiation, like fault girls and flowerers. Such workers were distinguished from the direct workers by their flexibility and availability to deal with day to day problems on the shop floor. They were paid day rates also.

⁶⁶ Interview with retired works manager and retired personnel manager

help from us, but they usually ended up with a higher earning level; so it was a kind of grading system that sort of evolved itself without there being at that time any formal system. And of course they were also in a position to be able to hanker for more money."⁶⁹

Alongside such informal processes the company often extolled trustworthy and long established workers in a more public fashion in the *Loudspeaker*:

"On the second floor of Q.V.R. Works there is a small section of coilwinders, section 23. The twelve ladies who work there have a total of 175 years continuous service to their credit; and takes no account of the 20 years service Mrs Coy did before she left in 1940 returning in 1945; and ten years service Mrs Blower did before 1935 returning in 1948. Talking to one or two on the section, we found that no one had less than 5 years service, and such figures as Miss Ashton has 32 years service, Miss Wilkins 30 years service were not uncommon. The majority had never worked on any other section, so by the sum of their experiences we felt were talking to a bunch of experts."⁷⁰

This extract has been drawn from a feature entitled 'Experience Counts' which suggested that the company perceived experience as one of the criteria in the informal differentiation of workers, in this instance actually claiming the women concerned were experts. So far I have suggested that formal differentiation was minimal, but further examination of my material suggests that, as well as backhandedly financially rewarding experienced and skilled women, there was a different form of differentiation negotiated in terms of job titles. An example is provided by the company magazine, when a report notes:

"We met Miss Taylor who is one of the Utility Girls, because she is equally at home with any of the jobs on the line."⁷¹

The point being made in this discussion was that the job title Utility Girl corresponded to an experienced worker who was able to do a range of jobs, but the manner in which the title was

⁶⁹ *Ibid*

⁷⁰ *The Loudspeaker*, Feb, 1934, Vol. 8 9, P2A.

⁷¹ *The Loudspeaker*, March, 1948 p30.

constructed also underlines the gendered character of this designation. The same features can be identified in the following extract:

"Miss Bates will shortly have completed eighteen years experience. She is one of our Utility Girls. For the first five years she was engaged in the winding of condenser units. She later transferred to Final Inspection, where she commenced entirely different duties. And for the last five years she has been an inspector. In the examination of this important component of the modern telephone Mrs Bates has achieved a high degree of skill, and we gather takes a great interest in her work."⁷²

Again the company acknowledges and even celebrates a highly experienced and 'skilled' worker, (skilled according to the company's own definition, for in this case the woman referred to worked in Final Inspection which was conventionally a male skilled job) yet, they still define her only as a Utility Girl.⁷³

The above examples serve to demonstrate some of the ways the company structured a gendered job hierarchy. Other examples included such categories as 'Shock Troops' and 'Fault Girls'. It is worth noting at this point that the first of these terms was used during the war, and gave a particular infection to the role of these women, implying that they were temporarily allowed to ignore their femininity in the interests of advancing a popular war. This was one of the ways women were celebrated as the champions of production, and the word 'troops', involving very masculine imagery, served to make this link. In contrast, femininity was again resurrected in the post-war period in job titles such as Fault Girl and Key Girl, whilst other titles included 'floaters'.

Several key dimensions of such job categories were identified by one of my informants who commented:

"I did several jobs, I could do almost anything. I was fast and accurate. I was also very electrical minded. I had worked at one time or another at all of their plants. I was in the

⁷² *The Loudspeaker* June 1959

⁷³ (For a further discussion of women and inspection see chapter seven.)

GBC thirty years altogether. Well, I mean you cannot get more experienced. I could turn my hand to anything at the turn of a hair and they knew that. In the end I became a floater, because you see I didn't want to be anybody's 'boss'. I just wanted to be one of the girls and have a laugh."⁷⁴

Clearly, although women are generally portrayed as less class conscious than male workers, this respondent saw the opportunity for limited upward mobility involved in being a supervisor as a real dividing line, and thus refused to take part in a structure which she knew would alienate her from her fellow workers. There were advantages in being 'one of the girls', there was a sense of identity and solidarity which was too precious to be lost. At the same time this excerpt reveals the range of competences possessed by such women and the way their competence was contained within the confines of a secondary labour market structure, and disguised in gendered job titles. This was validated by the following exchange:

Kate; "R. can you explain more fully what a floater was?"

"A floater was a highly experienced worker who had to have knowledge of every part of the job. That's the way they found out that I was a good worker, well gifted. And there was the time I was in Spion St. and they wanted me to go to Dun Laoghaire in Dublin, because they were opening up there. They were setting up and wanted me to go as a trainer for a little while, but of course I couldn't accept because of the children. They were very little and anyway I was ok as I was, I mean I wasn't going to gain much."⁷⁵

This again is an interesting comment and deserves further elaboration. What emerged most vividly from this account was that women could not be always be enticed by the limited rewards associated with such 'promotion'. However another respondent highlights how such women were rarely offered real recognition or meaningful promotion opportunities:

"Well I was at the GBC twenty four years. I was able to do virtually anything they might ask. Of course when you first started it was very much a matter of chance, the luck of the

⁷⁴ Interview with R.B. (b.1922) (Worked at GBC 1950s-82)

⁷⁵ Interview with R.B. (b.1922) (Worked at GBC 1950s-82)

draw what you worked on. Well that is how it seems, we weren't special, but there again you had to have the ability there already, but you never thought about how useful you were, because I think as a woman you underestimate yourself don't you, and no one questions that. But you see I did all kinds of jobs for them, from production work to inspection work, all of that. But no one turned around and said we were good, or paid us."⁷⁶

For the most part women felt that training programmes, experience, the imparting of skills to other women, acting as tutors, and setting up shifts were all part and parcel of their job. They did not generally view these activities in the light that it may be possible to treat particular functions and features as negotiable in order to achieve an improvement in pay, improved status, and better working condition. On my evidence it appears that generally the women did not see these possibilities.

The rather esoteric job titles which I have discussed constituted an ambiguous layer in the internal job structure. However, among these jobs the few which involved formal promotion opportunities carried significant penalties. In this sense women made sensible judgements: first line supervision was the only post given recognition, and as such was the only way to promotion and many women did not see that it offered any advantage over production work. For instance one woman commented:

"Well I mean I could never see any advantage in that, being a Key Girl, because they were glorified labourers at everyone's beck and call. Now I was asked once, the foreman said, 'C... How about you taking the job', someone was leaving see, I said no I wanted a quite life. And mind you in the long run the pay was no better."⁷⁷

This comment is representative of the women concerned including those women who actually took on the job of 'key girl.' This comment bears testimony to the argument that the company failed to provide any incentive to women to want promotion. It was advantageous for the

⁷⁶ Interview with E.B. (b.1921) (Worked at GBC 1938-60, 1961-80)

⁷⁷ Interview with C.N. (b.1926) (Worked at GBC 1965-83)

⁷⁷ For a further discussion on women and supervision see chapter seven.

company to maintain an almost horizontal job structure with the exception of formal promotion to first line supervision, with some workers structured into an informal layby. By retaining able experienced women on the shop floor they secured a store of expertise, and stabilized the internal labour market in secondary sector conditions.⁷⁸

As I have shown in a previous section the company placed considerable emphasis on training for the women concerned. Not only did they train women, but they also systematically selected them according to ability and job matching. Moreover, one of the underlying reasons behind the re-engagement of former female employees was to regain proven workers.⁷⁹ These various categories of women were then located within a largely horizontal internal labour market, which was cross-cut by two types of formal distinctions. Firstly full-time workers were distinguished from part-timers in terms of their relative job security. Secondly the bulk of shop floor workers a range of 'Utility girls' with particular experience and expertise, and above them were a smaller number of 'Key girls'. These latter distinctions involved minimal levels of differentiation in terms of rewards, and the dominant feature was rather that of a pattern of informal and relatively opaque variation in experience and expertise.

Looking at the women's responses showed that for most women promotion was not a priority, for the limited opportunities offered failed to provide sufficient incentive. The pay-off of being regarded as 'different' from the other women on the shop floor was not appealing, and did not outweigh the solidarity and friendship associated with remaining just one 'of the girls'. This attitude can therefore be understood partly as a response to the manner in which management defined and rewarded (or failed to reward) the more experienced⁸⁰ of the women who worked at

⁷⁸ It is worth noting the parallelism here with similar patterns of employment conditions for women in an electrical factory in Brazil, cited by Humphrey who argued:

"Rather, women's position at the bottom of job hierarchies is due to their greater stability when not promoted, which encourages management not to fully recognize and reward their training, experience and skills." *Gender, Pay and Manual Workers in Brazilian Industry*, P.6, By J. Humphrey, 1984, Sociology Dept, University of Liverpool. Instead of rewarding proficient workers, the company he studied preferred to retain them on the shop floor where their expertise and knowledge could be drawn upon. This pattern resembled a similar process within the GEC.

⁷⁹ See section two of chapter four for a further discussion.

⁸⁰ See next chapter for more discussion on women in supervision and inspection.

QBC. However it also relates to other aspects of the company's perception of female employees, a feature which has been discussed particularly in the previous chapter.⁸¹ Moreover the company's ambiguous attitude to the question of skill, and the respondents' contradictory responses fed into a system which placed women at the bottom of the job hierarchy.

⁸¹ See chapter five for a fuller discussion.

Changes in Work Processes: Bench Work to Line Work

The remainder of this chapter is organized in three parts. The first two discuss examples of changes in the work process and the implications this had for the sexual division of labour. In the last part I use my interview material to examine women's attitudes to the changing character of work, placing the different generational views into perspective. The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate some sense of change and how women experienced and perceived this, set against the benchmark of their previous and sometimes current experience of bench type work. In particular I consider whether such women perceived the changes as an erosion of their personal competences.

Work at GEC had been organized in two principle ways, on the basis of a multi-task single bench type operation and according to the notion of a flow line process. Change involved both the technical and organizational transformation of work, in ways consistent with both Taylorist and Fordist principles of change: in some ways the two methods were used to complement each other. In the case of multi-task single bench operations change meant the adoption of Taylorist ideas, involving the systematic analysis of a job; the atomization of a task into a series of separate operations; the specification for a measured time to each operation; and the assignment of an operator to a series of such operations. Although the work was analysed into potentially separate units it was retained as a whole task; for example the wiring of a plate was undertaken by operatives working individually at single benches.⁸³

Several different sources of information show that Industrial Engineering and Work Study featured strongly in the organization of work at GEC. Firstly there is the evidence provided by managers' own reflections. For example one personnel manager reported in a recent interview:

"It is true that in the past we had a considerable amount of bench work, and while it looked difficult, it wasn't because you see we had industrial engineers working on it all the time, to break down the work into small parts and to simplify it"⁸⁴

⁸³ As I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous sections this required specific competences.

⁸⁴ Interview with Personnel Manager (b. unknown) (Worked at GEC 1963-Present)

In a previous section I discussed bench work and women's perceptions of such work; where they argued it was manipulatively complex linked into a focus on quality also. Against this background this comment, which represents one theme of the management perspective, reveals important ambiguities for it denies the complexity of the work but does not fully explain why, given such circumstances that industrial engineers had to work continuously to simplify it.

As the manager's comments imply there was a limit to the number of tasks that could be organized on a individualised and repeated basis; so that the use of multi-task individual bench work was retained for many of the sub-components of the GEC's products. However pressure for fast work was incomplete and this underlined the complexity of the work (as I have attempted to show in the previous section quality was most important): although speed might have been the company's optimum goal, the emergent contingencies associated with the work could not always be envisaged, therefore measured and timed.

In summary it was only some of the work that could be adapted to Fordist methods, but aspects of Taylorism remained very popular, a pattern which Kelly suggests characterised the new industries and was particularly appealing in the field of electrical engineering.⁸⁵ At GEC the application of Fordist principles were in evidence from 1948 onwards, and was used in the assembly of the telephone, wireless sets, and laser in the 1950s in the final assembly of television sets. At first the work was simply organized on a line basis where each individual worker carried out a task or a number of synchronized tasks. The pace of the line was set by the workers. Later the work was organized on the principle of a mechanized conveyor belt which determined the pace of work for the operatives, with implications for control which I will discuss in the next chapter.

⁸⁵ *See notes of Westinghouse Electric of America:*

"This corporation became a strong advocate of Taylorism, time study and systematic job analysis." *Job Redesign*, Ed. Kogut, D. Willmott, M. pp16,17. Evidence suggests that this method was equally popular within GEC. It is likely that the Americans lent influence in this direction for Morrison and Jones argued that GEC as part of the international cartel shared ideas as well as markets.

According to Loudspeaker this method of organizing work began as early as 1948 when line production was introduced in the assembly of Radios:

"Radio assemblers make our wireless sets, and each of those tremendous rows of girls is known as the line. The many bits and pieces which go to make the works of a wireless set go into the line and complete sets come out at the end. At the beginning of the line we met Miss Taylor, who has been making radio sets for the GEC for the past seventeen and a half years and is known as one of our UTILITY GIRLS because she is equally at home with any job on the line ..."⁸⁶

There are a number of features implicit in this comment which deserve attention. Firstly, the label "Utility Girls" referred to very experienced versatile workers, who could deal with any task on the shop floor. According to Kelly (1983) such workers commonly play a very important role in direct production, particularly in the case of absenteeism when they substitute for absent colleagues. Secondly, the gender specific character of the work and workers is emphasised, indeed the terminology highlights and combines both gender and work characteristics in a way which glosses over the fact that the women concerned were mature women, and not least that they were also experienced workers. Finally it should be added that sometimes there was very little technology except a conveyor belt and occasionally even this was not present. This meant that although the work was broken down, the old tools and techniques were still in use.

While it was the era of standardized production methods, for the company this method had limits:

"Everybody on the track seems keen and contented, lest we become too enthusiastic, we were reminded that track production can only be applied to a few of our products".⁸⁷

Without more adequate information it would be difficult to give precise reasons for this, but there were two possible answers. Firstly some of the products, like the telephone exchange systems and the smaller sub-components appear unsuited to this type of assembly process

⁸⁶ The Loudspeaker, February, 1948

⁸⁷ The Loudspeaker, Nov. 1950

because they involve small batch sizes or involve few parts. Secondly cost and product type partly determined the production process. Radio and particularly television in the later 1930s were competing in very competitive and seasonally fluctuating product markets, which were also being transformed into mass markets making cost a crucial factor encouraging standardized techniques. Furthermore, even when the flow line was introduced it was not without its difficulties, a point recognized in the *Loudspeaker*:

"This raises new difficulties for, while many operations are simple enough, quite a number are exceedingly intricate, and if an operator is to complete these in the same time as her fellow operators she is going to need some help"⁸⁸

This comment underlines both the problems of 'flow' and the complexity of the work, and this demonstrated some of the limits on the company's hope for faster work. Speed was inhibited by the problem of achieving synchronization for, as Kelly has argued:

"It is often difficult to divide product assembly into equal chunks for each worker on the line; in addition workers themselves vary in their abilities, experience and motivation compounding the balancing problem."⁸⁹

The *Loudspeaker* comment also suggests that there may well be some form of skill required on the assembly line. Indeed in the light of my earlier discussion, the company's use of terms like simple but also intricate highlights the contradictory nature of the work.

I will now turn to a consideration of my interview material to explain the manner in which women workers experienced these different forms of work, and the changes within and between them. In the following extract the respondent explained how she experienced and perceived the shift from bench work to line work. This extract comments on experience in the early part of the 1930s:

⁸⁸ *The Loudspeaker*, Nov, 1930, 171.

⁸⁹ *Job Redesign*, Ed Knight, D, p 36

"Well we moved onto another floor, I had moved from plat wiring to assembly where you didn't have to do the whole thing, just a few bits."

Kate: "Can you explain a bit more how this made a difference to you".

"It was what they called line work, I mean you run the component on a steel rod so that it passed around to each person. What happened first the key girl put the plate on the steel rod, the first girl who heads the line and who was the quickest worker began the job. She then passes it on to the next one, so that you don't have to get up, you are within arm's length of each other. Each girl pushed the component along. The whole job was timed out by work study in the first place. Each aspect was measured out timewise.. It meant that if you got left behind it was your own fault, they would then be regarded as not quick enough. So as soon as the component came to you, you had to push your component on to the next girl"

One thing this comment shows is that although the work had been both fragmented and organized as a line this might involve little capital layout for new machinery. The most competent worker was placed at the head of the line and was expected to set the pace for the remainder of the line:

Kate "And how many aspects of the job did you undertake after the change"

"I did the same as the complete plate wiring job, but only one aspect of it. I still cut the wire with a pliers, and scraped it down and pointed it. Not everyone did the same".⁶⁰

This shows that merely breaking the work down into fragments retained the need for some of the same competences. Such change had other implications for the workers involved:

Kate "How many minutes would that take."

"Maybe five minutes more or less."

This shows that the same process was repeated every five minutes.

⁶⁰ Interview with M.A. (R.1913) (Worked at OBC 1950-54)

Kate: "And in terms of a bonus, how did the two experiences differ"

"Well I must admit I never earned a bonus, or at least a good one when I did the whole thing, but the money was better on the line, but there again you couldn't leave your seat except at break times, or with the permission of the supervisor, or key girl who sat in for you".

Thus extra money was exchanged for less freedom and tighter discipline.

Kate "And what about job satisfaction, were you more or less satisfied?"

"Well when I did the whole thing, it was frustrating because you see you tried to hurry but couldn't because you also had to think about the quality. We were only paid flat rate for repairing our rejects, so you couldn't earn your money. Whereas on the line it was monotonous, uninteresting, and you did the same thing all day long, and you couldn't even go to the toilet otherwise the work piled up."⁹¹

This comment touches on a number of crucial points in reference to worker competence and productivity. Firstly, the kinds of skills required for newer work were linked to speed and dexterity, but appear different from those needed for the bench work. Whilst being similar to bench work in the reliance on simple hand tools, they were now involved in a speedier execution of dilated manipulative operations, and the consequences of this was monotony. Secondly this set of requirements limited the possibility for earning bonuses, since components were checked for quality and if they failed the test the bonus was not paid. It would appear that speed and accuracy became increasingly important particularly with the introduction of the mechanized conveyor belt for it took control of the pacing of work out of the hands of the operatives. Thirdly in terms of job satisfaction a low wage and frustration were exchanged for monotony and a relatively higher wage.

It would appear that speed became increasingly essential for women especially at the Spon Street Plant. According to the Works Conference minutes and AEUW documentation⁹² there

⁹¹ Interview With M.A. (b.1915) (Worked at GBC 1930-54)

⁹² Minutes of Works Conferences 1934-55, Modern Records, Univ of Warwick AEUW Minutes, 1934-55, AEUW Archive, Corporation St. Coventry

were more work stoppages as a result of attempts to speed up production. In addition other documentation showed that pacing became the order of the day. For example, a report in the C.E.T. explains:

"Sets are coming off the assembly lines at the rate of every two and a half minutes. But in two or three months time the rate of production will have been speeded up considerably and before many months have passed new sets will be coming off the line at the rate of nearly one per minute"⁹³

In this context speed and accurate performance culminating in good quality work output constituted the competences and 'skills' required.

In this section I have attempted to catalogue some technical and organizational changes in the work which nevertheless did not involve occupational substitution: the changes did not at all disturb the division of labour, either, in displacing specific categories of labour, or in recasting the sexual division of labour. This work remained 'women's work' requiring 'women's skills'. I will now turn to a second example where there was a dislocation of one category to be replaced by a different category of labour.

⁹³ Coventry Evening Telegraph 31-12-69 p.9

Work Processes and Changes in Job Gender Boundaries

While many of the changes associated with line production took place within boundaries of 'women's work' there were some examples of the alteration of gender-job boundaries in this section I will discuss one instance of what ostensibly appears to be a case of 'dilution and substitution'. The shifting of job-gender boundaries was signalled in the remark of a former supervisor while he was explaining the layout of the work:

"Then you had the cableforming section where men were employed, but yet through a door there was a cableforming area where for some reason women were permitted to work on cables."⁶⁴

This is an interesting comment for it intimates a sense of perplexity about female workers in the cableforming section. There is a sense of the women being out of place, or more perhaps that this work was lent to women (Cockburn 1986). It transpired that cableforming had been a 'male task' up until 1955, but it should be noted that, although men were paid a higher wage for this work than women operatives, and were regarded as 'skilled', they were not apprentice trained. The work was subjected to two particular changes during the late 1950s. Firstly it was increasingly fragmented, and secondly one category of male labour was replaced by female workers. In order to explore the significance of these changes I will firstly outline the technical changes made to the work, and then consider the relation of these to gender divisions. The technical changes are illustrated in the following account:

⁶⁴ Interview with Mr. B. (b.1942) (Worked at GBC 1963-1974)

OLD EQUIPMENT PRACTICE	NEW EQUIPMENT PRACTICE
------------------------	------------------------

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Drawings used | Drawings eliminated. |
| 2. Nail-ups required | Nailups eliminated. |
| 3. Knowledge of codes required | Running lists revised. |
| 4. Ability to interpret lists | Lists simplified. |
| 5. Large sloping board 11' by 5' | Horizontal fixture. |
| 6. One person (male) does job | Two persons involved. |
| 7. Lacing not split | One runs cables. |
| 8. Paneling not split | One laces cables. |
| 9. Panels laced | Deleted. |
| 10. Cross arms | Deleted. |

The changes made both altered and simplified the interpretative and manipulative aspects of the work. Without actually seeing this work it would be difficult to assess the precise extent of change, but items 1, 3 and 4 refer to the interpretative aspects of the work, and here, while drawings were removed running lists and codes remained in a simpler form. However two of the manipulative aspects were entirely removed (Items 9 and 10), while for items 7 and 8 there was a further division of labour which may reasonably be regarded as eroding the level of skill involved. It is very difficult to make any comment in respect of item 5, because the document mentions the size and angle of the old board, but fails to mention the size of the new task. Cumulatively it is very difficult to assess the extent of change, except to accept that some change did occur which involved simplifying the work. Whether the work was deskilled, or whether it deserved to be defined as skilled in the first place remains a pertinent question, which has particular relevance for understanding the implications of the sexual division of labour at GEC. Certainly the modified version of the work was regarded by the management as "women's work". The basis of this judgement was spelt out in an employer's submission in the following terms:

"It is appropriate for a woman worker. The intelligence required is of a lower degree. I am not suggesting that women are not so intelligent as men, but they have deskilled it from that angle as much as possible. The running lists have made the job much simpler, which a girl can do after a reasonable period of training. It is well within women's physical capabilities. Change for example the lacing up operation is much simpler because a shuttle has been provided and women operate by slipping the shuttle underneath the wires, obviating the hand lacing that has been done previously"⁹⁵

In this account two key factors signified the work as women's work: 'intelligence and strength'. Male workers were seen as being in possession of superior strength and despite equivocation they were seen to be more intelligent. Remember that prior to the change the men who worked at this task were regarded as skilled, even though they were not apprentice trained.

When the changes were made the union involved, the AEUW, perceived this as ordinary dilution (and this challenge was the circumstance which has carved the developments to be documented through disputes procedure records). Their response was to argue that the changes had not been sufficient to deskill the work, and that it was a male job. The extent of the union's concession on the latter point was that they demanded that women be paid according to the Extended Employment Of Women's Agreement. This was motivated by a concern to safeguard the male rate for the job, but when translated into pay levels for women meant that they would receive part of the male rate:

"It is under the Extended Employment of women that this change should be made. But the principle, the thing we are most concerned about and which we feel is most important, is that men have always done this work and the men's rate is the one which has always applied to the work"⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Coventry and District Engineering Employers Association, Executive Minutes, May 1955. Works Conference Minutes, May 1955, Modern Records Center, Univ. of Warwick.

⁹⁶ Works Conference Minutes, May 1955. Modern Records Center, Univ. of Warwick.

The implication of the union's demand was that although women would benefit from the enhanced pay rate, it would redefine them as temporary workers, for the Extended Employment of Women's agreement prioritized the male right to work. The company argued that work using both the old method retaining male labour and the new work engaging women should operate. I discussed this pattern with the former supervisor and asked: "In your view do you consider technical competence the reason for the division of labour?" He pointed out that: "Well you see there were a few men sign writers, and of course the men on cableforming, and they had to read drawings and lift the very big ringing machines, so strength was important." However when I asked, "Maybe the male workers received very specific training for a specific skill"? His response was, "No I don't think so."⁹⁷

Clearly there were changes to the cableforming work process during the mid 1950s. However this exchange shows that the original pattern was not simply a case of non-apprenticeship, for the limited specific training suggests the problematical character of the skilled status of these male workers. At the same time I find it equally problematical that the new work, which involved reading codes and running lists as well as manipulative competences, should be seen by the company as suited to female workers because of the reduced intellectual demands. Against this background we should be wary of interpreting the pattern of changes in simple deskilling and dilution terms, as it appears to involve more subtle shifts in the patterning of semi-skills which are glossed over in a gendered vocabulary of dilution and substitution. In this context the real changes in work processes become opaque beneath the social construction of skill and non-skill.

So far I have tried to illustrate the nature of change in the organization of work, and I will now use my interview material to explore the women workers' views of such change. However what follows is not commenting on particular instances of change, but is a rather more general discussion of the values and perceptions which characterise the older cohort of women whom I interviewed.

⁹⁷ Interview with Mr. B. (b.1942) (Worked at OBC 1963-1972)

Women's Perspectives on Change

The responses of one older informant provide a particularly interesting, though somewhat idiosyncratic perspective on changes in the organization of work, for she had worked first on single bench operations at Stoke before leaving work, and then returned, ten years later to another GEC plant when although track work was in full swing, forms of bench work were also retained. Her comments do not focus on the two examples of change just discussed, nor indeed on the relative shift to line work, but offer another dimension to the notion of change; and as such offer a more general reflection on perceived change in authority relations and the implications this has for standards both of personal competences and work performance. Out of her discussion emerges a partial conclusion about the consequences of change in the work in regard to two themes, that of work performance and authority relations, though as we will see the latter at least had rather equivocal implications for her own conduct. Her reflections on some of the issues were as follows:

"Me, 'laughs', I liked to laugh at work, but, no air you were not supposed to and you 'didn't', but we were always having fun. At the same time what I mean is, to do the job properly you had to give it your all, total concentration. You couldn't talk to your mates, and if you wanted to have a chat, you had to stop work, and then you lost money, well I never made any. Now the soldering, that is what gave you the headache. The solder was in strips. You applied the strip of solder on the point you wanted to secure before applying the iron to it. The idea is to melt down the solder to just the right amount, and if you put too much on you had to scrape it off with a hook. You had to learn that. And it was only after I went to Ford St. and saw what they did there on the track work, and I mean the work that was going through, after the beautiful work I had put through for them, I was amazed really. There they had some very young girls doing the work, and they were putting great globs of solder, you have never witnessed such a mess. And I said, 'They will never pass that work.' They asked me, 'Why not,' I said, 'If we had turned out that work at Stoke, the foreman would be on our heels. And then, the foreman said, it is not like when you were up

at Stoke.⁹⁸

It should be noted that this comment is a reflection on the respondent's return to work after a ten year break. Firstly it suggests that the respondent's image of work and the standards of work were based in her experiences of bank wiring during the late 1940s and perhaps early 1950s. Secondly, for the respondent, as for those in a previous section of this chapter, 'skill' was embedded in tasks, activities and personal competences. Thirdly such personal competences were in part achieved through on-the-job experience within the context of authority relations characterized by detailed control by the foreman. Finally what the respondent identifies as change is a shift in authority relations as well as a deterioration in worker performance. Work standards had dropped.

Such a perspective was based on the respondent's previous experience of work, authority and 'skill' when, she suggests, work standards were relatively higher. In comparing the experience of returning to work and her earlier performance she elaborates:

"Well, of course, I eventually got used to Ford St. I eventually got on well. I had all that experience from Stoke. The quality did not bother me in the same way as it had done at Stoke. In Stoke I was constantly stressed because of the standards of the work. At Ford St. there were no standards it was poor, that really bothered me, but in a different way, well you didn't feel you were doing anything too serious, and after all no one cared. At Stoke the work got me really down. It depressed me, I hated it, but I was damned well determined to stay and do a good job. I never liked it, you felt you were doing something I mean....maybe good, but I stayed."⁹⁹

Thus on her to return to work and finding circumstances and attitudes to work had changed she adapted to the new situation. In her earlier experiences strict discipline, frustration and adherence to a certain set of work standards were exchanged for a sense of feeling relatively important in the workplace; while in the later work situation less demanding work, having proved

⁹⁸ Interview with W.M. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1933-36, 1941-43, 1955-65)

⁹⁹ *Ibid*

to be less stressful, produced a new kind of frustration. In some ways this was at least perceived by the respondent to represent a challenge to her perception of her competence, and her sense of importance in the workplace. Nevertheless, having acknowledged the changing situation, that sense of hitherto being a quality worker could be salvaged when comparisons were made with the younger women:

"Well, of course after my return to the GEC, well I was able to judge, I could tell good quality. I really felt that I was a superior worker in contrast to these young girls. I could still do the close work. (The respondent is now referring to the 1960's in the Ford St plant.) There was a lot less pressure. The jobs were done more slap happy. The standards of work had certainly dropped and were sloppy."¹⁰⁰

This respondent's expectations of work standards were framed in the earlier experience when, she believed, standards were higher. This leaves her feeling that she possesses superior personal competences in contrast to the younger and less experienced women. At the same time this rationalisation is linked into the change she believed she has observed in authority relations in the workplace:

"And after I went back, it was a different atmosphere which of course the foreman had already explained to me. I think the reason things had changed was simply because the girls, especially the younger ones, would no longer stand for it. No, they wouldn't take it any more."¹⁰¹

Thus authority relations had changed, and such a change appeared to have been brought about by challenges from the younger women. Underlying her comments is a sense of regret that discipline in the workplace now seems more lax, for in some ways such discipline was the way competence was achieved. At the same time discussions with this particular respondent's former colleagues suggests that like the younger women workers she disapproves of, she, too resisted discipline:

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*

"Oh yes in those days it was not all, yes sir and no sir sort of thing, of course some people were better at it than others, and our W... was one of the best, she always gave back more than she got. She was one of the "girls", a real rebel!"¹⁰²

Despite the previous respondent's insistence that work standards were achieved and maintained through an acceptance of stringent work rules, this comment suggests that she too had offered some resistance to detailed supervision.

I will now turn to some comments which are representative of the views of the younger cohort of women. It should be noted that their experiences also refer to the early 1960s, and like the earlier respondent place emphasis on the adherence to work standards. This excerpt conveyed the experiences of a member of the younger group, whose first job in the GEC at the age of sixteen was rack wiring:

"Well the first job I did was rack wiring, but I was allowed to go on it because I was very good. It involved a lot of wiring using different strengths of wire from very awkward angles. The job had to be made up according to specifications and drawings. The time it took to do it varied. But they imposed a lot on you, but I mean you could leave your bench and go to the toilet and do your hair without too much notice being taken. You did not take advantage of the situation, I mean really slinging your hook. The bosses office was very near, he was an old man, a Mr. West, and he was strict."

Kate: "In what way was he strict."

"Well you had to do a certain amount, but they were terribly strict about quality. It had to be spot on, no slap happy work, otherwise you had to re do it at your own expense and we couldn't stand there talking, but we managed to have a chat. I couldn't leave my job and wander off and have a gossip just like that. O.K. Anyway this is what we did, you would get up and take your drawing and go over to one of the girls and pretend to talk about it pointing to the print or whatever, while, for example, 'Oh I met this fantastic bloke down

¹⁰² Interview with N.B. (b.1917) (Worked at GEC 1932-77)

the Locarno last night, and we are meeting tonight'. That kind of thing, stolen moments, very exciting -103

This comment highlights three themes: the complexity of the work, the stress on quality performance, and attitudes to authority relations. The respondent begins with a description of the demands of the work, pointing to the technical and interpretative aspects, arguing that a particular work standard had to be satisfied, and thus suggesting the importance of quality, which was also sustained for the younger women through the control and discipline imposed by the foreman. This shows that although some of the older cohort of women may well berate the younger women for a lack of competence and a cavalier attitude to quality and authority relations, from the younger women's perspective they share quite similar views of such relations: what is different about attitudes to such relations is the way the different cohorts mediate and endure them.

In the next extract another younger respondent elaborates on the contradictions inherent in the organization of the work, which emphasises quality performance, the importance of authority relations and attitudes to the more experienced women:

"Well the points of friction were always about keeping up with output and standards. Now you had to be skilled and to be good you had not only to be trained you also had to be experienced, and to do good work you had to be able to get the good jobs. When I was a wirer and was first out of training school, a lot of the older women who saw themselves as the bees knees, people who were there ten years used to haggle about the price of work, of every piece they got. If they were given a bad job they made an almighty fuss, and they would have to be given something for having asked them in the first place."

Kate: "Do you think they were more skilled, and therefore expected the better priced jobs, or was it a question that they wanted the jobs that yielded more money."

"Well they certainly felt superior to the newcomers and for women with no qualifications it was a job, and they certainly knew what they were doing. I think the longer you were there,

¹⁰³ Interview with B.C. (b.1945) (Worked at GBC 1963-73)

the more likely you were to get the best jobs, and there were some women there the foreman wouldn't dare offer a duff job to. When you were 'new' and did not complain you got all the rotten jobs."¹⁰⁴

There are several themes which deserve attention here. Firstly, in relation to the more experienced workers and their 'skills', this response is double-edged, being both appreciative and critical of the older women. Thus, it accepts that the older women are competent within the context of the labour process at the GEC, and in this sense it is positive. However, this knowledge is then evaluated against a wider notion of expertise and is judged less glowingly. Nevertheless, the expertise the earlier cohort acquired at the workplace gave them an acknowledged power. At the same time there is also an implication that what was being argued about was not simply the competence resulting from experience but rather the capacity to obtain better rates of pay because of having an 'old hand' - a rather limited kind of power.

Despite the rather begrudging deference of the younger women towards the older cohort, they were also keen to establish their own claim on quality performance of the work tasks:

"I was a tester on small relays. On this job you needed to use a gauge which you used as follows. You first set it to test the set of springs which were on top of each other. That was to make sure there was the correct tension on every one of these springs. If it was too heavy, or too light, it was useless. I had also to use a small pliers in the correct manner, so that I could use the feelers. This instrument tested the small gap between the connection and the spring. It had to be the exact measure in centimetres, otherwise it was no good. The crucial feature was precision, that's for certain. And in no way could you dish out shoddy work."¹⁰⁵

Like the earlier cohort of women, the younger women too recounted the complexities of their work, mentioning the processes, the tools, the instruments and the precision required. Thus this extract demonstrates some sense of the importance of the complexity and competence in the

¹⁰⁴ Interview with E.D. (b.1947) (Worked at GEC 1962-69)

¹⁰⁵ Interview with M.F. (b.1944) (Worked at GEC 1963-84)

work of the younger women. In view of the way work had been reorganized I also asked this woman about such change:

Kate "I understand that a lot of the old ways of doing the work increasingly died out in the 1960s and later. Does that not mean that skill became irrelevant?"

"Well for a start I am in the AUEW and of course being a woman makes a difference, and it is also true that the work changed. For instance, we don't do half the hand soldering that was done. But there is new kinds of even more skilled work coming up all the time. Now with all the new aids we have and new kinds of machines and things, it has got to be more skilled hasn't it." ¹⁰⁶

It should be noted that in contrast to the previous discussion this comment addresses the issue of changes right through to the early 1980s. Thus she registers the considerable changes this which had overtaken the work, such as the demise of hand soldering, but suggests that the 'new machines' continue to make the work skillful. A discussion with a female convenor revealed a further twist to the theme of change and 'skill':

"Well the most obvious change in the work now is that everything is miniaturised, and we have a lot more technology, now that doesn't mean we don't need any skills, in fact we do, and I'd say the work is now more demanding, working on these small components is stressful...there is more precision and we have also improved the quality of the product...so there is less room and I'd say tolerance for careless output. But there again what we need is people who can do beautiful work and still keep up with the output, I mean with all this investment in machinery they will look for greater output and improved quality. See." ¹⁰⁷

Thus for this convenor, too, recent changes in the work process have if anything amplified rather than diminished the skills, largely because of the miniaturization of the product components. The company continues to demand better quality products produced more efficiently. Such demands continue to put pressure on the workers concerned, and as in earlier phases of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Interview with L.S. (b.1919) (Worked at GBC 1955-57, 1957-84)

production going back to the inter-war period, discipline geared towards improved quality and higher productivity remains important, thus making worker performance and personal competence crucial.

In conclusion, then, two broad topics dominate the comments of both the younger and older women: a stress on work performance in tasks and activities and the theme of relations of authority in the workplace. Although the older woman claimed that work standards had deteriorated since the inter-war period, the younger woman entering work in the 1960s still argued that good quality work performance was critical, and that discipline remained pervasive. The earlier respondents' conception of declining work standards by the 1960s may have some grounding, for though there was a stress on good quality work, there was also a stress on productivity enforced through the bonus system and later through 'line work', and the balance between the former and the latter may have shifted in the move from 'single bench operations' to such 'line work'. Therefore the consequences of speed may well have been that workers could no longer pay attention to detailed work performance, and this may well have resulted in 'sloppy work'. However, despite the organizational and technical changes the woman representing both age cohorts considered that personal competences, gained through on the job experience and expressed in tasks and activities embodied what they perceived as distinctive 'skills', and the most recent changes only strengthened this perspective.

Conclusion

My discussion of work competences and skills in this chapter does not seek to offer a general explanation of skill, since it may not be possible to generalise from the experiences of this group of women workers in work designated as semi-skilled. Nevertheless it offers a significant insight into the complexities of these women's experiences of such work, and their perceptions of skill, within the context of a particular period and specific workplace conditions. In attempting to portray the realities of this semi-skilled work, I want to draw attention to a number of themes. Firstly, underlying the discussions despite the difference in emphasis, both management and the women concerned recognize a range of competences involved in the performance of work tasks and activities characteristic of the production process at the GBC. Such a theme featured in many of the discussions with management, and the women themselves argued that they possessed a range of competences necessary to the production process: thus, some of them were able to perform a number of different jobs on the shop floor, while most had a very long work experience with the company. Secondly what is disputed both among the management and to a lesser extent among the women concerned is the character of such competence. The contradictory character of the managerial approach is illustrated in a stereotypical representation of female competence as docile female dexterity, while at the same time emphasising both the significance of training and on the job experience. Both the presence of training for the women and the high profile given to on the job experience suggests at least a partial objective grounding for the women's perceptions of skill. Indeed while management too acknowledge this, even accepting that the women had 'skill; what is disputed, then, is the character of such 'skill.'

Thirdly although the management offered a stereotypical view of female 'skill', the women invariably rejected such an image and instead emphasised work performance. Their perceptions of work and skill were quite complex, for despite change in both technical and organization aspects of the work, they rely on work performance and personal competence for their identification of 'skill'. It is in this framework, then, that they begin to equate training and to a greater extent job experience with the development of personal competence. This in turn is

judged against the conventional definition of 'skill', and as such is both denigrated and complimented. Thus I think the boundaries of their perceptions of their competence are captured in such comments as, 'I don't think apprentices should spend three years making tea', and, 'well, they certainly couldn't get someone in off the street to do this work', or 'well surprisingly we women were the producers, we made the goods, now how can anyone say we had no 'skills' -what we certainly never had was decent pay, and of course we were never appreciated in that way.'

Finally it is evident that such women provided a flexible and skillful source of labour to the company: such flexibility is illustrated in the re-employment of trained women, the shifting of such workers across jobs and within and between plants all with little or no pay differentiation. Indeed in a more direct sense workplace competence was glossed over in three intersecting ways: firstly a payment structure which, despite changes in the approach to women's pay remained rooted in a system consisting of a low base rate which never exceeded the rate for a male unskilled worker; secondly, a structure where differentials were generally constituted through incentive: and there was very limited opportunity for promotion; and thirdly through the construction of female competence as dexterity.

Thus I would suggest that an understanding of the practical realities of the work competences of these women, and of the complex and contradictory perceptions of these competences displayed by both management and workers, must be based on the insights of feminist writers, particularly Phillips and Taylor who underline the spurious divisions between skill and non-skill, and the analyses of 'tacit skill' developed by Wood and others. I have sought to draw on these ideas, outlined at the beginning of the chapter, in developing this account of the experience of women at the GEC, and in so doing I have also attempted to display and explore some of the complexities of the relationships between work experience and perceptions of skill, which these analytical approaches have begun to expose.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Changing Experience Of Work Organization, Management Control at GEC.

Introduction

In this chapter I will focus primarily on the manner in which women's jobs were experienced and the ways in which they appeared to be constructed by the activities of management and male workers. In the next chapter I will focus more distinctly on the patterns of female responses and resistance, including women's experience of and response to trade unionism. However, this is only a difference of focus, and inevitably my discussion of women's experience of the realities of work at GEC concerns the interplay of strategies throughout the two chapters.

The range of factories and work processes and the complex pattern of changes at the GEC over the period I have studied mean that it is both impossible and inappropriate to seek any simple or unilinear account of changes in the experience of work, or in management strategies for work organization and control. Thus I have sought to explore the character and experience of "women's work" at the GEC with two major concerns in mind. Firstly I have explored some of the variations in patterns of women's work experience and subordination, and secondly I have more substantively discussed episodes of change and their implications for the patterning of such experience.

In the first section I discuss some labour process literature on management organization of work processes, particularly the work of Edwards (1979), Burawoy (1979), Thompson (1986) Pollert (1981), Cavendish (1982) and Westwood (1984). Such a range of literature allows me to draw on particular features which provide a framework in which to locate my own account of the experiences of change and control at GEC.

Moving to my own interview material I then examine change in the assembly sections at GEC looking particularly at women's experiences of some examples of work reorganization. In particular I will be looking at some of the implications for the experience of control of the shift in work organization from bench to line work.

In a third section I switch my focus to the work experiences of women in the Machine Shop, a 'male section'. Examples of change here includes the shift from multi-task machines to single task operations, and a shift from small hand operated machines to more automated models. Change occurred in three stages: the shift from multi-task to single purpose machine, the shift from single purpose to more mechanized operations, and the recomposition of the sexual division of labour. Taking the Armstrong (1982) argument to its logical conclusion it might be expected that there would also be a shift from female to male labour. In this section I try to provide an explanation of why this did not appear to happen in any straightforward way.

In the next two sections I attempt to illustrate the way women workers were fitted into subordinate positions in the internal labour market. In these instances the interplay between capitalist strategies and male worker tactics will be highlighted showing how women's subordination in the workplace was a result of a complex and dynamic process.

In the first of these sections I begin by looking at the way women were slotted into inspection jobs and how, over different periods and in changing circumstances, their positions were challenged in both class and gender terms. I outline an example which typified a pattern where women were promoted during the war to higher grade work, later to be re-graded onto inferior jobs when male workers were available. I also attempt to show that the differences between higher grade and male work and lower grade and female work were superficial.

In the next section I focus on supervision, showing how gender was used to structure difference into supervision jobs shared by both men and women. Women were exposed to the same forms of discrimination as their counterparts in inspection in that, male workers enjoyed the higher grades, while knowing very little about the manual aspects of the work. Furthermore discrimination was practised through the application of different recruitment practices for male

and female labour. Superficial differences were also maintained through custom and practice. For instance the women suggested there was no formal difference in the job description of first line supervision, but discussions with management revealed a different picture. In the final section I discuss women's experiences of work in inspection and outline the trajectory of the changing pattern of the sexual division of labour in that area. Some of the implications of this material are then discussed at the end of the chapter.

Theoretical Debate

The debate on control of the labour process has been inspired by Braverman's (1974) deskilling thesis where he prioritises the necessity of control by the employers over workers in the interests of profit. The logic of Braverman's view presents an undifferentiated deskilled working class sharing virtually similar subordinated conditions in the workplace. However, Braverman's theorization of the control which is said to characterize employer/worker relations in the context of monopoly capitalism has been much disputed, not least for its abstract presentation of such relations, its neglect of active and conscious worker struggle, and the need to differentiate between phases of capitalist development and between employers, as well the different and varied effectivity of workers' struggle,¹ rather than assuming the unimpeded capitalist advance made on workers suggested by the deskilling thesis.

Edwards theorization of control suggests that there have been distinctive managerial patterns of control corresponding with particular labour markets and periods in capitalist development. For instance Edwards sees a correlation between simple control and secondary labour markets, and between technical control modified by the strength of collective bargaining and a subordinate primary sector, while bureaucratic control matches an independent primary market comprising of skilled workers with transferable skills.

Furthermore Edwards' notion of simple control characterises control in the era of competitive capitalism, where control was centralised in the 'boss' who was also the owner. This suggests a small firm where control was directly imposed on the workers in a personal manner by the 'boss', though Lintler (1982) points out that such a model lacks precision, for the sub-contract system involved a third party, a foreman, who was essentially the employer's agent. Despite these criticisms, the notion of simple control has been used as an analytical concept within the framework of this study because an implication of the Edwards analysis is that such forms may continue to play some role, especially in the control of secondary labour, even within larger

¹ See range of literature on the labour process reviewed in Thompson 1986.

companies. It has however been reworked to take account of the importance of gender relations.

Technical control is the second form of control identified by Edwards. Consistent with Braverman's argument, the deskilling process involves a tendency on the part of capitalism to expropriate human knowledge which was the property of human labour, and to embody it in the dynamics of machines. One of the effects of this process is to enhance capitalist control over the labour process, at the expense of the working class. This leads to a particular form of labour market, namely of subordinate semi skilled labour. The assembly line provides the most graphic example of technical control. Control is then transferred from foremen to the line.

Finally Edwards identifies a third aspect, bureaucratic control which introduces hierarchy into the labour market. He argues that in the period of monopoly capital and in the face of organized resistance against the imposition of tight technical control employers attempt to institutionalize hierarchical control through bureaucratic procedures and job ladders in a system of grading, whereby workers are incorporated into a sophisticated job structure which Edwards equates with primary labour markets.

There has many criticisms of Edwards. In particular it is contestable that there is any neat correspondence between his typology of phases in capitalism, size of enterprise and types of control. Thus while Edwards' attempt to differentiate forms of control is useful; it cannot be uncritically accepted for the following reasons: it is a unilinear conceptualization, which visualises capitalist development as an even process which in some ways suggests that one form of control is replaced by another. Secondly as noted by Zeitlin (1979) market forces plays an influential role not only in employer-worker relations, but also between competing capitalists and between workers. Thirdly as Kelly and Wood (1982) argue worker strategies are not simply a reaction to management strategies, but are also initiated through distinctive forms of organization and consciousness. Fourthly, there is a need to examine the independent role of not only the product market, but also labour market conditions, as well as skill and claims to skill in the organization of employer/worker relations.

Finally this typology also neglects the role of gender in the hierarchization of labour markets. This set of criticisms challenges Edwards' view that there is necessarily any neat correspondence between forms of control and particular stages in the development of capitalism. In contrast to this Thompson (1986) argues for the need to examine specific instances of such dimensions and structures of control, suggesting also that the particular form control takes is a result of the problem of management having to manage, suggesting that control is much more problematic than the Edwards' typology would suggest. Alternatively Thompson suggests 'combinations' of control structures which are much more short term managerial strategies and techniques rather than any grandiose plan implied in the Edwards typology.

Several other authors, such as Burawoy (1979) and Friedman (1977) have been more sensitive to the complex dynamics and possible contradictions of control strategies. Thus Burawoy whose work is characterised by a central focus on shop floor activity, argues that while workers contest the wages and piecework system they consent to other aspects of control within the workplace. However, such writers like Edwards fail to recognize the importance of gender as a dynamic factor in the interplay of workplace control and resistance.

The importance of gender as a lever in the subordination of women workers is raised by a number of feminist ethnographies. The salience of Pollert, Cavendish and Westwood is that their work documents both similarities in forms of control experienced by men and women, and distinctively gendered features of such control: both the operation of technical controls and payment systems and the gendering of supervision, grading and incentives. Thus Pollert highlights the experiences of the women weighers and packers in the cigarette factory, who were employed for their speed and dexterity. Cavendish provides a graphic account of the way women were subordinated by the speed of the line system; and Westwood signals a different version of technical control when the women concerned attempted to keep abreast of the industrial sewing machine and the constant threat from the work study engineers. Thus, while they provide a lucid account of the kind of control experienced by women in a variety of work places, much of their discussion focuses on the importance of gender as a determinant in the subordination of women. Such subordination is identified in graphic terms by Cavendish who explains that male workers

occupied all positions in the job hierarchy, whereas women workers were tied to the line, and were in the poorer paid and the least mobile jobs. Both Pollert and Westwood examine the issue of gender relations from a slightly different perspective; for they both give it a dynamic role in the labour process, although they appear to differ in their conclusions. For instance, Pollert's discussion of the domestic banter between the male supervision and some of the older women suggests both challenge and collusion to control in the workplace, yet, her conclusions tends to imply that such banter is more or less a legitimization of the sexual division of labour. In contrast, Westwood's account of the women fighting the minutes appears to give a different gloss to the kind of domestic challenge offered by the women. She seems to suggest that the politics of reproduction played out in the workplace by the women actually influences patterns of workplace control against management, sometimes slowing or halting production output.

What this suggests then is that the analyses of control cannot be presented in any simplistic or one dimensional fashion. What emerges from the debate is that in the context of workplace politics control is a dynamic and changing process, and although underlined by considerable consistency is at the same time distinguished by features and conditions specific to particular workplaces. For instance in the case of the GBC such features as the growth of the organization, the labour intensive character of the work and a preference for female labour will raise questions about the types of control strategies pursued by the company. Thus in this study I will rework some of the Edwards' typology, but only as a point of departure for discussing the interplay of different elements and facets of control as it was experienced by the women in particular workshops and at particular moments. What needs to be understood is how the women interpreted and coped with the different control strategies they faced, bearing in mind that the shape of the company too changed through expansion and growth accompanied by considerable re-organization involving both Taylorist techniques and technological innovations. This meant that it grew from a single plant in the 1920s, when the whole production operation was organised in a single unit, with the foreman playing a central role as the mediator of control on the shop floor, into a large multi-plant firm in the 1960s involving many more workers, greater volumes of production, in wider range of products, a more acute division of labour and increased technology.

creating many new functions and jobs.

In explaining shifting relations of control and consent, Edwards' conceptualization of control offers a starting point for examining changing patterns of control over time, as well as demarcating dimensions of control. The notion of dimensions of control is put forward by Thompson, who includes in this notion gender and pay structures two features which are of central importance in this study. Furthermore, Thompson draws on Burawoy's conceptualization to underline the complex dynamics of control and consent which may involve the different dimensions of management control.

It should be noted that although such a framework has been adopted, the organization of work at the GEC cannot be very easily slotted into the Edwards typology. As I have recognised, although the OEC grew and became a bureaucratic organization as is inevitable in the case of a concern of this size, yet this feature did not exclude other dimensions of control. Secondly, when using the notion of bureaucratic control we must be sensitive to its specific character and limits within specific types of work organization. For although Edwards sees a correspondence between bureaucracy and primary sector labour markets it can also characterise control in forms of secondary labour markets such as that for women at GEC. In contrast to the Edwards typology of bureaucratic control, while undoubtedly bureaucracy characterized the administration at GEC, such bureaucracy was not embodied in job ladders and pay awards for the women concerned. Rather the women at the GEC were perhaps guided by a different type of bureaucracy, or set of rules organizing production, namely the bureaucratic regulation of uniform job categories which also facilitated flexibility.

Against this background I will attempt to demonstrate some examples of the importance and the longevity of aspects of simple control for the workers at GEC, and will show that central to this control was the salience of patriarchy. At the same time technical innovation involved some modifications of this emphasis. Such control was met with forms of limited resistance and contestation rooted in both the labour market and union organization.

Change and Control in "Women's Work" in Electrical Engineering.

In this section I will be concentrating on the changes in the organization of work in assembly, which was defined as 'women's work', and the implications this has had for control. In a previous section I gave examples of how the shift from multi-task single bench type operations to flow line operations fragmented the work, and examined women's perceptions of this shift. Using my material I will now examine the consequences of this from the perspective of control.

In this context I will be examining the shift from single bench type operations and the development of the assembly line within the context of the electrical engineering section, women's experiences of this transition and the implications for control. Attention will be focused on two plants, the Stoke Plant which mainly manufactured telecommunications, and the Spon Street Plant which in the 1950s and 1960s produced television using standardized methods for a competitive mass market.

Edwards' notion of technical control provides a useful insight into how the gradual mechanisation of the labour process, interwoven with the bonus system and employer expectations and assumptions made about women workers, systematically curtailed worker autonomy. In order to highlight this I draw attention to women's interpretations of 'bench work' versus 'line work'. Evidence indicates that by the 1960s the interweaving of mechanisation, the imposition of more tightly drawn bonus systems, and detailed supervision had brought about a system of pacing for women in particular plants. Furthermore, I would argue that product market conditions had an impact on such features of the labour process: the more intense market competition, the more pervasive mechanisms of control became.

However, the character of these processes needs specifying more fully than Edwards' provides. For example Kelly (1985) in his analysis of electrical engineering in the post war period argues that the key feature, the electrical goods assembly line, can be distinguished from the typical Fordist model, which embodied a single product, the Model-T Ford Motor Car, produced on the basis of a standardized automated production process employing male workers who in turn were said to be organized in trade unions and were more prone to militancy. By contrast Kelly argues that the assembly line characteristic of electrical engineering was distinguishable in the

following manner: it employed female workers, had less union density, less militancy, involved a different attachment to work that was unskilled, was labour intensive, required manual dexterity using simple tools on a simpler conveyor belt, and had a high labour turnover.

There were similarities between Kelly's study and work at the GEC. The GEC relied heavily on female labour characterized by a high labour turnover. Both my interviews with personnel management and reference to E.E.F. minutes confirm this. I am not going to enter discussion about the cost and benefits of labour turnover to the company, however the organization of work on a part-time basis exaggerated the problem. There are similarities to Kelly's model in the area of union organization also, for while developing, this remained diffuse and weak, and was further undermined by part-time work. In view of this set of features the company was fairly free to define or re-organize jobs as it thought fit. It is within this context that changes in the nature of work and control should be understood.

The most obvious difference between this study and Kelly's study is that his combines a large number of small electrical engineering firms, producing a wider and more changeable market product. By contrast the GEC was developing into a large multi-national, and had a narrower range of market products in what was in some respects a more stable product market. For instance both purchasers like the Post Office, and the Ministry of Defence, and the international cartel to which the GEC belonged provided a safer and more stable market environment up until the late 1960s. The Post Office provided an important domestic market for the Strouger System. However for other domestic consumer goods like television the company competed in tighter markets, which according to Marriott and Jones (1977) still remained profitable. This difference in product market conditions appeared to have implications for the way work was experienced on the shop floor. In this context I will be looking at the contrasting experiences of change and control in the making of telephones at the Stoke Plant, and in the making of televisions at the Spon Street Plant. Such considerations are not given sufficient attention in the Edwards' typology, for I would argue that in the case of GEC market conditions had an impact on the choice of labour process, specifically in the shift to increased mechanization.

I attempt to demonstrate that the shift to conveyor belt type operations was uneven, in that single bench type operations survived throughout the period under review. Two reasons are offered in explanation. Firstly there was little product change, for example the Strouther remained in production with some modification well into the 1970s. Secondly sub-components were difficult to organise on the basis of the conveyor belt. However, according to Kelly the consistency of the single product would inevitably lend itself more to standardized methods. Some of the first products to be assembled using a form of this method were the telephone, radio and television. But sub-components for these products continued to be produced using multi-task, single bench type methods. It is, then, multi-task single bench type operations that I will examine first.

According to several recollections the insistence on quality was the key decisive feature defining the effort women put into such work. This example is an illustrative recollection of the late 1940s:

"Well I did all kinds of work there, but there was a lot of us working at benches. We did trunk wiring. It was for radio. You worked from a drawing. It was slow and painstaking. I never made any money. The key girl was always there breathing down my neck. She inspected each stage of the work. If it was poor, I mean the soldering was not done well, you had to re-do it, and if you made too many mistakes you name entered a book. That was bad. There was a lot of pressure on us to make sure the quality was good."³

Bench work was subject to detailed supervision. Individual workers were held directly responsible for quality and output, and as I have noted in chapter three there was an individual bonus system of payment isolating workers from each other. According to the interview material very little had changed by the beginning of the 1950s:

"The plate wiring was very tiresome. The job itself was as big as a foolscap sheet of paper and perhaps wider. It was on a frame known as a jig. There were little pegs where you had

³ Interview with B.D. (b. 1920) (Worked at GBC 1940s)

to turn the holes in first, the next step was to get all the wires at the current bend and when ready, all different lengths and colours some were striped, some dark, some plain. You had an instruction booklet. There was a plan to follow. Some wires were done up point to point. But generally each one had a particular path to follow, and went to a certain point. You wouldn't cross these over, and if you put them on top of each other, well it was sometimes about 2 inches deep. You had a pair of pliers and you constantly straightened them out. They wouldn't stand flat but had to bunch out. It was difficult work. I wouldn't earn my money on it. Maybe if I liked it, it may have been better⁴

Work that required concentration together with a tight bonus system were the hallmarks of control as it was experienced by the previous respondent. The next commentator gave only a slightly different interpretation of her experience in stressing the linkage between complex work and pay raises as the root of the problem:

"Well you began first by doing the basic assembly. You had a frame and you worked according to a colour code. You then sorted out the wires which was followed by doing the actual wiring. You had a set of instructions for each individual wire, I mean in terms of where and how it was to be connected. The book might have up to sixteen pages of instructions depending on the size of the plate you see. You did all the wiring step by step and followed that with the soldering. Now you had to be extra careful with the solder, and you had to ensure you used the right kind of solder. I mean a very fragile frame with very fine wires which then had very fine solder applied to them. You just applied the tip of the solder and you had to know the period of time to allow the solder to flow. You see it was very complicated and in those days wasn't given the recognition it deserved. If that had been the case we would have got more money and that's half the battle"⁵

In this context the company's insistence on quality imposed by the presence and close attention of first line supervision ensured that corners were not cut:

⁴ Interview with M.A. (h.1915) (Worked at GBC 1953-1955)

⁵ Interview with B.B. (h.1921) (Worked at GBC 1958-60, 1961-80)

"This work was extremely important depending on what you were doing, for instance, in the case of soldering where you were applying it. I mean I always referred to the key girl but usually with the inspectors. I mean, I'd say, how would you like the job done, do you want plenty of solder, or would you prefer point to point, or perhaps a wrap over, you see each one wanted something different, now to do that on line type conditions was not the easiest thing to do, because each one was sorta special"⁶

This excerpt shows that direct workers were immediately responsible to both the key girl and inspection. In the next example the respondent again emphasized the attention to quality imposed through the supervisor:

"Most of the women were on wiring at some stage. You sat at a bench, it was equipped with a soldering iron, and some other tools. I was wiring jigs. It was fitting the bits together. I first threaded eight to ten wires through a set of eyelets having firstly painted the receiving bit of equipment with a kind of glue, then I pulled the wires through pressing the parts together. Then you placed that in a device which kept them in place, the problem was it was very difficult to get them to fit evenly without one slipping over the edge, now you had to trim solder and dress the wire. If it was ok it went into the oven to be dried. Now as you completed each jig, the key girl came along, and inspected it. She thoroughly looked at it. If it was the slightest bit out you re-did it. After re-doing it, she again inspected it, and finally when it came out of the oven she looked at it. If it wasn't up to standard you had to re-do it. Now it was only after she passed the 'baked' jig that you could write it in your production book. I never made any money. And of course a reject didn't get a bonus"⁷

These extracts give some insight into the way control was experienced, as well as endorsing arguments in an earlier section referring to the complexity of bench-type work. The use of hand operated tools and the reading of drawings offered space for some creativity and worker initiative. The pacing of work characteristic of mechanized line work was absent, yet it appears that

⁶ Interview with R.B. (b.1920) (Worked at GBC 1947-51, 1952-73)

⁷ Interview with W.J. (b.1944) (Worked at GBC 1960-74)

control in this instance was almost as pervasive. Any potential for creativity and autonomy was offset by the very tight bonus system combined with an insistence on quality. Any mistake, or work that did not meet the requirements was immediately traceable to source. While the technology did not tie the worker to the line, the drive for quality framed by the tight bonus did Kelly underline the resulting paradox:

"On the one hand, workers individually had more control over their work pace since they were no longer obliged to work at the pace set by the whole line. On the other hand, again as individuals, workers were more visible to management; it is far easier to allocate responsibility for low output or poor quality when workers function as individual stations than when they are collectively operating an assembly line."⁸

I will now turn to the evolution of work organized on the basis of line organization. Line organization using Fordist and Taylorist ideas evolved in a series of stages, with the initial fragmentation of work, the shift to a form of manual line operation, and eventually the transformation to a mechanized conveyor belt, without power driven tools, which gradually reduced the operative's time to complete the task, and thus intensified the pace of work. Moreover, such pacing was unevenly experienced across the different QEC plants. In particular, available evidence identifies two patterns of activity characterizing the production process. The Stoke plant which manufactured telecommunications equipment experienced less lay-offs and provided no accounts of line pacing, but on the other hand this plant had very large hand assembly sections organized around tight bonus systems which during the mid 1950s was paid at a lower rate than machine shop work. (See chapter three for a reference to this). In contrast the Spon Street plants which manufactured televisions during the period under review experienced periods of intensive production, followed by lay-offs.

In this section I will examine the way the shift between bench and line work was experienced by the women concerned. A characteristic comment was:

⁸ Job Redesign, Kington, D., p44

"I was asked if I wanted to go on the line, it was making up a telephone. There was no track as such just a kind of rod which you put your finished component on, and the next girl got on with her bit of work. But there again you repeated the same thing all the time, and to avoid boredom, they let us do different bits of the work, and that happened in case where somebody didn't come in, but it was easier than bench work any day. The problem was you couldn't stop work. You began at 7.30 and worked away nonstop except for a tea break at ten to nine, and that was it till dinner. No getting up and going off to the loo. But there again we could say to each other hold on and we could work as fast as we wanted."⁹

This account suggests that control had changed in form making quality a collective responsibility. In contrast to women's experience of bench work, one of the first complaints about line work was not being able to move from their work station. Women complained of being confined for such long periods without a break, in what was objectively less interesting work. Edwards' typology provides a useful yardstick in understanding the shift to line work, for he would see this as a move to technical control. In this case a rudimentary 'line' is introduced which although using line technology, alongside the bonus payment still tied the women into the work on the basis of in participation and responsibility of the collective line. In this form of work organization, the pace of work was set by the condition of the line and the bonus: any potential autonomy was offset by the technical control provided by the line and a very tight bonus system which penalized slacking.

The introduction of a mechanized conveyor belt was the watershed in the system of control and was in operation from the late 1940s, but was used selectively, firstly in the assembly of television and radio. The Loudspeaker insists on celebrating its merits:

"The belt travelled up the shop and as each container passed a given point it was counted automatically and a buzzer sounded at the head of the track. This announced to the first operator that the work had reached her station. She took a set of parts from the moving

⁹ Interview with B.D. (b.1920) (Worked at GEC 1940s)

shelf. The belt then passed over a roller and began to return to its starting point. By this time, the first operator had completed her operations, placed her work on the returning belt and takes the next set from the lower belt. Then the next operator took the set from the lower belt and began her work where the last operator laid off. Each set of parts was arranged to arrive at the operator's elbow in just the time it takes her to complete her operations, so that no one is kept waiting for work".¹⁰

Further, the article claimed that the pace of the track was set according to the wishes of the women workers:

"The speed at which the operators work is decided by themselves. A substantial bonus is possible on track production, and if employees wish to increase their earnings they ask their foremen to speed up the track; if on the other hand, they want an easy hour, they ask for a decrease in speed and their wishes are met".¹¹

However this comment glosses over an essential point, which was that the pace of production was largely in the hands of the foreman. The foreman as opposed to the workers had technical control over the pace of work. Tied into the very tight group bonus system there was indeed very little room for worker autonomy, for according to one of the women the opposite was more accurate:

"Well the line certainly tied you down in many ways that bench work didn't. The main problem was they could try to force you to work at a certain pace, and some are quick and some are slow, not everyone can be the same, but you see they didn't take that into account. Now if they were going to get an order out fast, then they would put a very fast girl at the start and she would start the ball rolling. If you wanted to go to the loo or anything you had first to get the key girl to relieve you, and even then the work piled up, why should the key girl work her guts out, she was not part of our bonus scheme after all. Now the thing was with the group bonus, if it was small and it usually was, then I can remember the time when

¹⁰ *The Loudspeaker*, Nov. 1930, p.172

¹¹ *The Loudspeaker*, Dec. 1932, p.66

some of the women would get after the shirkers. Now I was considered to be one of the fast ones and they used to come and say, B..... should head, well I used to work only as fast as the others would want, and that was the beauty of the line, because you could slow up. Now after it became a moving track that was different."¹²

Control of the pace of work had clearly shifted significantly from the workers to the management. The manual aspect of the labour process still ensured some worker initiative, but that was constantly regulated by the effects of the track and the "bonus" scheme. It is important to see from this extract that the women were able to find tactics whereby they gained some leverage over the work process. In this instance, an experienced worker regulated her effort and pace to accommodate slower colleagues. However, in her experience the introduction of the mechanized track undermined this.

I will turn to women's experiences in the Spon Street Plant. An initial glimpse of the changes involved can be gained from the publicity recorded by the company in the local press. The reorganization and speeding of production was celebrated in a report in the Coventry Standard which appeared in 1951, illustrated with five photographs of women workers dressed in white coats at work assembling a television. It heralded in bold headlines:

"Radio factory, where skilled workers are mostly women. A radio or tv set produced every minute"¹³

Apparently this vision remained attractive over the next decade as efficiency in the guise of speed and increased production was promoted in the local press. Thus according to a report in the Coventry Evening Telegraph in 1960, the GEC was hailed as the pioneer in Automatic Assembly:

"New Plant Capable of One Set in Fifty Seconds GEC claim world lead in Automatic Assembly. The significant part about it all was the smooth operation of the different lines, their speeds are governed from a central control, and the lack of wasted effort has cut the

¹² Interview with B.D. (b. 1920) (Worked at GEC 1940s)

¹³ Coventry Standard 2.11.51. p8 Local History Archive.

cost of labour. The company by these means is to cut one third off the cost of direct labour for each television set. Because production has increased and because labour has been able to transfer to other areas within the company, the total labour force has increased rather than declined. About 500 workers are employed on television and radio and nearly 95% are women"¹⁴

This emphasis on 'central control' implies that control had shifted further into management's hands. The key feature for workers was that mechanization enabled management to intensify the pace and volume of production. The experience of my respondents was that a reduction in costs was achieved in two ways, by reducing the number of workers on the task and by speedup.

This was Lottie's experiences of track work when she was first introduced to it in 1961:

"Well I was once on a fairly easy going section in Stoke, and I wired jigs. It involved adding some finishing touches to a jig and was bench work. You worked at your own pace, now you can imagine what it was like when I came over the Spon St plant, it was all whips out and lashing, it was get your eyes down for 100% of the time, no second was to be lost"

"What were you making there?"

"We were in televisions, it was track work, assembly, it was basically adding components. And because we were on televisions we were not allowed enough time to put the sleeveings around the components. We used to have to bring the sleeveings home and cut them to size, and take it back to work, so that we could sleeve all our components that gave us a head start so we could cope .. Mind you I think it was more slave labour. I used to sit at night and cut them up and in the morning I'd go in with a bag full. Sometimes I got one of the older children to help. I wasn't the only one, we all used to do it, fill our hoppers up ready for the work to come up. So you see it was really a slave labour job, and they wouldn't allow a union in those days and really there was no point in joining, because you never

¹⁴ Coventry Evening Telegraph, 20:7:60 p11 C1

knew when you were going to finish".¹⁵

For this woman the reality was that in order to beat the bonus system, work was taken out of the workplace, into the home to be partly prepared not only by herself but with the help of children. Even then it was still very difficult to achieve a worthwhile bonus. This example serves as an indication of the intensity of the pressure the women were working under. Targets had to be met. There was also an acute awareness that the conditions were ones of increasing exploitation, together with a feeling of the lack of any viable means to change the situation. These features are underlined by her fuller testimony:

"Did it always remain that stressful at this plant?

"It just got worse. After some time they reorganised within the plant and each floor did a job, but the first floor that was the floor I was on, and it was the most awful, you see everything there was on a bonus. There was a terrific amount of pressure you see everything goes into the finished product. They called it the workers floor and it was. To get off that floor you had more or less to go in a box. Once you are trained and you grew to learn to bear the pressure they wouldn't let you go. The key girl walked up and down and would yell, 'Don't talk, carry on with your work'. Well it just went on like that. And one day, I replied, 'I'm doing my work, but we are still human beings.' I mean the girl who sat nearest to me was crying. I went to see to her, and the foreman called me inside and said, 'you are here to do a job if someone cries, ignore it' don't take any notice. They cried, it was awful. I really wish I would find someone for you from that floor".¹⁶

In this account the respondent is referring particularly to line work in the later period, in the late 1970s. The apparently soft-style management approach had changed. In these circumstances women responded to the pressure and frustration in the way that women are assumed to react and the foreman's dismissive reaction should be noted and underlined.

¹⁵ Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at CIBC 1940s, 1958-1980s)

¹⁶ Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at CIBC 1940s, 1957-1980s)

While line pacing represented a contrast with bench work, another feature involved significant similarities with bench production, for an important feature of the line organization at Spon Street was that line workers were held responsible for quality and penalized accordingly:

"You were expected to keep a very high level of output together with a high quality of work. That was strictly monitored. I mean some of the work I was on was no bigger than a pin head. Now if you made three mistakes you got your name in a book. You see it was hard sometimes to find those defects. So if your name appears in that book more than once a week you are called before the foreman to be reprimanded. Well after a little time he will tell you you are no good for that job. That's the kind of discipline that went on".

"Was it not possible to go to the union and do something about it?"

"Well you see it's a question that women didn't feel able to do anything about it except work their guts out or leave, so it spirals from that".¹⁷

This evidence suggests that workers at the Spon Street plant were expected to both increase volume and improve quality output. Since they were held accountable for quality they were tied through discipline into an increasingly tighter control structure. Kelly (1985) suggests that work organized on a line basis makes it more difficult for management to pinpoint the individual's mistakes, but in this study some women argued that the company was able to identify them and subsequently reprimand them for their performance. Mistakes were traceable to source, and this was achieved although the work was organized on a line basis.

Having stressed that there was a tendency for tightened discipline and work pace on bench production I do not want to suggest that there was a simple and unilinear trend towards increased pressure with line production. I will now turn to a smaller plant at Brandon Road which carried out transmission work, and where the workers concerned experienced a fluctuating level of work activity:

¹⁷ Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at GEC 1940s-1958-1980s)

"Well the price of the job controlled you, because once you were given a price you had to work towards that end. When I started first I was on wiring, I can't remember what it was for, or even that I knew what it was for at the time. Many people couldn't do it, and were sent to the packing section or somewhere else. Anyway after some time I went on line work. Whereas the first wiring job I did took about three days to finish, in this one you added just a few components so it was easy really. The problem was, once you finished a job you often waited for the next one. You see they were terrible managers there. And once the components and the new job came the old harangue would begin all over again on how much the job was worth so there would always be a three or four day wait. I spent as much time sitting there waiting as I did working"

"And how did you feel about that?"

"Well in some ways it was great, you just sat there chatting, reading. The only thing was when the work came in you didn't feel like doing it. Jobs were always running out. It was a mysterious place to work. You might get a job that lasted six weeks, or a job that lasted a day. When I was on the 'track' you never knew. It seemed once they had an order in it was all half broken loose, every line was at work and then suddenly no work and we never knew. You could be working flat out for six weeks and then nothing for three weeks. It seemed a very expensive way to organise things - but then the wages were low and perhaps allowed for this".¹⁸

The potential to speed up remained available to the management, but in contrast to the previous experience, this plant appeared to oscillate from drives for intense efficiency, to working at levels which grossly under utilized its productive capacity. (Beechey and Perkins, 1987, also make this point in connection with the company.) I would tentatively suggest that there are two possible interlinked explanations for this, tight labour market conditions, and a competent, cost effective labour force.¹⁹ Workers were not laid off at Brandon Road, and arguably this was

¹⁸ Interview with B.H. (b.1943) (Worked at GEC 1963-1968)

¹⁹ Similarly a study of the garment industry, particularly rain wear, shows a seemingly soft attitude during slack periods. (See Cummins 1966).

because wages were sufficiently low to accommodate periods of slack, while in a period of labour shortage it benefited the employer to retain proven workers.

By contrast during the 1950s and 1960s at the Stoke Plant control and pressure was portrayed as more even, with less peaks and falls in activity. Explanations for this difference may be rooted in the product market position of the company in respect of telecommunications systems, when it enjoyed fairly secure domestic markets.

In conclusion I have focused on the shift from bench to flow line. Drawing on some preliminary remarks on Edwards and Kelly I have attempted to develop an account of assembly line production and its interaction with other aspects of control. I have suggested that variations in such control had some relationship in different product market conditions. In doing this I have also registered the variation in work organization across plants and through time. I have also highlighted quality as an aspect of control which was embedded into bench work and later incorporated into line work and its links with the bonus system. Overall the shifts in the organization of work show that a combination of technical, payment systems and supervisory elements were involved in the elaboration of management control, though these were challenged at the margins by women on the shop-floor.

Gender and the Change in Work in the Machine Shop.

In this section I will examine the organization of work and control in the machine shop. Central to this question are three issues, the technical change in the labour process, the sexual division of labour, and recomposition of labour and job allocation, which incorporated the shift between manual and mechanical operations, the shift between heavy and light work, and the shift between dirty and clean work. Periodization will be taken into account.

Data for this section has been drawn from interview material conducted in 1984 with women workers who had previous extended work experience in this department, information drawn from the *Loudepeaker*, the company house journal, as well as interviews I conducted with management in the early part of 1989. I also visited the machine and press shop areas of the main works in Stoke and was given a guided tour of the shops by one of the superintendents.

In the early 1950's the machine shop at the Stoke Plant was a large department divided into eight sections. They included dials, the carbon room, screwmaking, hand presses, milling, drilling and capstans. The capstan section was again subdivided into the power shop and the auto press shop. Altogether the machine shop had 630 machines.

The job structure was hierarchical with men at the top and women in subordinate positions, and while men were distributed in most job levels women were clustered in predominantly production jobs on the shop floor. According to my recent observations this still remains the case. Male workers were also involved in both the control and the maintenance of the department, and at present comprised the majority of production workers on machines, with women in the minority. All levels of supervision in these areas were male, some recruited from the shop floor. The chargehands were male, recruited from the setters on the shop floor, (Interview with Works Manager) so were the foremen, the superintendents and the works manager. The skilled workers were male, and other workers dressed in white coats walking around the shops were also male, with men in all positions involving decision making and jobs closer to the shop floor like progress chasers, work study engineers, as well the traditional skilled workers like setters. In March 1989 the company appointed its first fully skilled female chargehand. The works manager enthusiastically told me that she had the same status and pay as the male chargehands, thus

breaking links with the past, however during my visit around the machine shop area, I noticed that she supervised a section which involved more bench type work, where the majority of the workers were women with the exception of three semi-skilled male workers. This certainly was maintaining traditional patterns where women only supervised women's sections. (See the section on supervision in this chapter for a further discussion.)

There was a further division of labour on the shop floor. At present direct workers on the shop consisted mainly of male workers comprising of older white men, younger Asian men, and some black men, while women formed the minority. They constituted Asian, black and white women. The women I saw were clustered on the few surviving manual operated machines. Jobs in direct production like setters and all craft certificated jobs were allocated to men. Women were at the bottom of the job hierarchy, but there was some informal demarcations between the women. This was based on experience and whether they were able to work full-time as opposed to part-time work, and bargaining skills.

Before going on to discuss the sexual division of labour more fully I will outline an example of technical change located in the interwar period. The Loudspeaker's description of the organization of work gives some sense of the degree of work fragmentation. The next excerpt describes how a spindle was produced:

"For example, the production process began with the first female operator, who cut out the basic shape on the metal using a guillotine. The next step in the operation was undertaken by a second female operator who cut out the basic shape on a thread milling machine. Further adjustments were made by a fourth female operator on a grinding machine. A fifth operator carried out the assembly of the two components by clipping the two together"²¹

This example typified the way work in the traditional engineering section at GEC had been fragmented. It showed that single purpose machines, as opposed to multi-purpose were in use, where the work was task specific and repeated. In the inter and post war period women worked

²¹ The Loudspeaker, February, 1948

on milling, drilling and on capstan work. During my visit to the press shop I observed one line of machines consisting of not more than six women organized on a similar basis. They were paid according to the Gang System of PBR. The women sat in front of their machines. The work performance pattern consisted of feeding small components into the machine which was operated by a kind of foot pedal. In some cases the output was produced at the back of the machine. In one instance a woman sat facing her machine operated by a foot pedal and with her right hand fed a piece of metal about eighteen inches long and one and a half inches wide cutting holes in the metal at regular intervals. The common feature characterizing the processes was that the operator was directly involved in producing a component and was in control of the pace of work. This gives some sense of the rate of change, where in this section the conventional technology dating back to the 1940's was still in evidence in much reduced volumes in the 1980's. By this time job rotation characterized the organization of work. The superintendent explained that the company wanted their workers to enjoy job satisfaction. However in a discussion with the works manager I was told that complete 'job flexibility' was essential, in this sense it is important for workers to be able to operate many machines which endorsed Kelly's (1985) argument which suggests that job redesign benefits the employer because it can provide a greater reservoir of competences.

During the past years the number of manual operated machines has declined, an event recalled by some of my respondents:

Kate: "Do you remember any change in the machinery during your time with the company?"

"Well there use to be a lot of hand presses, and it had a handle, and you swung it around and swung it back, and you put in the work. They had guards on them, and then they started having automatics."

"So what was the difference between a hand press and an automatic."

"In the automatics you put your batch in, and pressed a button, and waited for it to be done, and in the hand presses you continued to work the handle all the while."

Kate: "Which job required more skill, the hand presses maybe."

"Yes in some ways, but then you still had to be careful with the automatics, I mean you had to keep the machine clean and do other things. They were cleaner because they blew the 'acraft' and oil away from you."²²

This shows that while there was a shift from manual machinery women were still able to operate the newer and more automatic processes. Other women too endorsed this point:

"Yes being a woman never prevented us from doing the work, I was at GEC for twenty-four years, I came here from ...during the war and I went straight to GEC, and stayed in the machine shop all that time, I worked all the machine except of course some work the skilled men did."

In an interview with a former works manager he explained that the company had relatively little conventional technology left, the shift from electro-mechanical to plastic obviated the need for it. This was confirmed during my visit while I observed quite a number of machines which fell into the mechanical category, and two types of automatic machine, while very few of the manual category survived, but they still had a some "fly" and "dolly" presses. This typology requires some clarification.

Machines according to the retired works manager could be divided into three types manual, mechanical and automatic. For instance, both "fly" and "dolly" presses fell into the manual category, while the term mechanical covered a very wide range of machines but can be defined as such where the operator both stops and starts the work process.²³

The distinguishing characteristics were that the operator was in control of the pace of work, and the machines were hand driven.

The division of labour within this department was based on craft certificated skill, dexterity, experience, size of components and levels of capital intensity. The sexual division of labour was based on certificated skill, dexterity, size of components thus assumptions about bodily strength

²² Interview with M.B. (b.1913) (Worked at GEC 1938-50)

²³ Interview with E.P. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1940s-1960s)

²⁴ Interview with Works Manager and Female Convenor.

and in the later period levels of capital intensity.

Using my interview material I will now examine this process beginning with the division of labour and the more manual operated machines:

"Well women were employed on the smaller presses and on what we call "dolly presses that was predominantly female because of the size of the "piece-parts" and women's nimble fingers you know"

"Where would you place "dolly" and "fly" presses in the skill hierarchy"

"They would be certainly classed as semi-skilled work, their dexterity was needed there. The simple way to see it is, the unskilled worker makes no impact at all in producing a part, but in this case they have to locate the component properly"²⁴

Women were regarded as suited to more labour intensive work, particularly where the components were very tiny. This was a practice that went back to the 1930's for according to my respondent's it was younger and "green" female labour who worked these machines in the interwar period:

"Well you see, the work was so small that you actually needed a forceps to pick up. That was a problem. So they put the young girls on the small presses. When you went to GEC, first you became a messenger girl for six months. And then they put you on the hand presses, and after a long time you managed to get off these. I remember the chargehand, his name was Kershaw and a right bullying type. When you are fourteen years old you are only a kid when all is said and done. You see I never went into the street until I was fourteen. I was kept around the house, and then it was a very rash thing to do to go into a big factory like that and mix with all those people and be expected to do that work. It was after I worked on the presses that I earned a bonus. Mostly, the jobs were rotten, but some were good. But you had to watch out. You had to be careful if it was a new job and the time officer was due to come around. He would stand behind you to see how quick you could do

²⁴ Interview with current Works Manager (b. unknown) (Works at GEC at present)

it, but they (the young girls) got wise to him and would dilly dally a bit and wipe the press and do all sorts of things. Mind you, it was essential to wipe the press but not just at that moment. The idea was to spin the job out."²⁵

This comment makes a number of important points. It confirmed the former argument that women worked on the manual machines. Secondly it upholds the suggestion of semi-skilled work, for workers graduated onto this type of work, thus illustrating an informal training and job hierarchization process at work. The youngest women began work on the smallest presses where manipulation was a priority, and was physically demanding, highlighting a workplace competence denoted on this occasion as dexterity. Furthermore this comment also showed that even young women in the interwar period displayed some degree of worker consciousness, and had already found ways of resisting the imposition of tight timing. They were aware that they were on the receiving end of the most disadvantaged jobs, a point the management acknowledged:

"Both the dollies and the "fly" presses were very tedious, the "dollies" were operated by foot, but the fly press operating was and is easily the most demanding and boring of the range of mechanical operations. It is certainly more demanding than power press or capstan work. Because an operator will pick up a "piece", locate it, put it in, blank it, take it out and so on. So it is repetitive and physically hard."²⁶

These latter extracts provide some sense of the way work became gender specific. Firstly management were very conscious of and deliberately set out to job match making certain assumptions about female skills. Women were deliberately allocated the most tediously demanding work. The irony here was that while there was no dispute that the work was semi-skilled, and that female labour carried out the most difficult semi-skilled work, yet their competence has been constructed as dexterity. How best to explain what appears to be a double pronged process. On the one hand, there is a process of learning going on, but instead of only seeing it as semi-skilled labour, the employer also envisaged the experience as a dexterity. The interview material

²⁵ Interview with M.B. (n.1915) (Worked at GBC 1938-50)

²⁶ Interview with Works Manager (n. unknown) (Worked at GBC as presser)

suggests that this was one form of on the job training, as well as a familiarisation with the work-place ethos, because women then graduated onto the more mechanical machines leaving the hand operations. During my visit to the press shop I observed that the few dolly presses left are still operated by women.

Women looked forward to working the less manual machines:

"When I first went into the Relays I did assembly of components, but by then there was a shortage in the press shop, and I used to work one half of the day on the hand pressed. Then I moved in there altogether, and stayed for twenty odd years on that. I was on the presses, big and little. We had up to size 8, but you didn't get on so that easily. I mean I was there five years before I could get on to them. There again that depended on whether the foreman thought you were good enough. And you only got to work the bigger presses after you were there for a long time. But even on the small presses I mean they couldn't give you all bad jobs. Well maybe I was lucky, but I worked for five different foremen in all over that time, and if I had a complaint I would go and speak to him. No you see they just had to share the jobs out. There again you had to know how to go about doing it. And you had to get on with the foreman"²⁷

This comment is set more within the context of the 1940s, when labour market conditions had changed. Firstly it shows that women worked on the more mechanical machines. There was no guarantee that a woman graduated onto this work. Getting a better job hinged on three inter-related factors; work experience (translated into technical competence) tacit bargaining skills and patronage with the foreman.

However in discussions with the current works manager he argued that both responsibility and technical competence were crucial to this type of work:

"In the conventional mechanical machines if the operator mislocates the tool and it breaks, it is a costly business. So being aware of this gives a sense of responsibility, and of course

²⁷ Interview with B.J. (b.1925) (Worked at GBC 1939-1963)

they must be responsible, and there again after the piecepart has been located properly it is more interesting for the operator to observe the machines moving through the stages.²⁸

This shows that the cost of components contributed to the status and value of the work. This work was then seen to need diligent competent workers. Worker requirements then extended to responsibility and was a contributing criteria in the construction of an experienced worker. While I have shown in the former extract that experience though necessary as a port of entry to a job on the mechanical machines; some form of tacit bargaining skills opened the door to jobs that were considered better. While my interview material involving the women concerned strongly suggested that women worked on semi-skilled mechanical machines in the post war period, it does appear that this now has changed. This is despite being told in an interview with the current works manager that the sexual division of labour was based on the following:

Kate: "So what was it is that distinguished a job as male or female."

"Well there are a number of things, first there is skill, then aptitude, and the size, what I mean is light and heavy work."²⁹

Skill, aptitude and the difference between heavy and light work were factors in job segregation. In the context of work in this section in 1989 during a visit to the machine shop I saw rows of Herbert machines all worked by semi-skilled male workers. The typical work performance consisted of the operator placing a piecepart in a tool, locating it in the machine and then executing the operation, taking the component out of the tool and so on. This involved male workers only. The difference between this and the kind of work women did on the fly and dolly presses, was that in the former the component was placed directly in the machine, thus obviating the need for the tool. I had few opportunities of asking more questions for I had been whisked through this section at great speed on my way to see other female workers. Women did not work on this type of operation. This was ironic in view of the fact that I had been assured of an equal opportunities policy in operation. So in view of this evidence and compared with my respondents recollections

²⁸ Interview with works manager (b. unknown) (Works at GBC at present)

²⁹ Interview with works manager (b. unknown) (Works at GBC at present)

suggest that women are doing fewer jobs in the machine shop than hitherto, and are employed now as much for their dexterities as for other skills. The disappearance of small manual machines as well as changes in the labour market has brought about fewer jobs overall in the machine shop, and certainly fewer jobs for women. Technical competence was the key factor underlying this work, and the evidence would appear to suggest that women were still not considered to be capable of this. Another important theme used in job stereotyping was the difference between light and heavy, and clean and dirty work, and it is this that I will next explore.

During the inter and post war period women operated the heavy machines, which involved working in dirty processes also. Interviews with my female informants confirm this:

"Well I eventually became a Power Press Operator, that was a semi-skilled job. It was really rough. I only did that work after I had been there for a long time and had a lot of experience. You had to be older to do the heavy presses, the kids did the hand presses, but on the heavies you had vats of oil, and you had to soak the bakelite in it before putting it into the machine. On the heavies you did a lot of standing up, and I mean when you are in your teens you know, you can faint at certain times in the month, I mean working from 7.30-5.30 and Saturday is no joke. They put men on the heavies on the night-shift, and there was a few men on that job on our shift as well, but it was absolutely filthy work, soaked in oil you were."³⁰

Such jobs were sought after and could only be secured through long established experience, and forms of tacit bargaining:

"Well it was very hard to get on the heavy presses and the automatics you had to be able to haggle and to argue and to get old Mr. Jones the foreman to let you, and then it was only for women who had been there a very long time and would answer back and shout."³¹

These comments show that women in the inter and post-war period worked the heavier and more automatic machines. By contrast I as I have previously said the only women I was shown

³⁰ Interview with M.B. (b.1915) (Worked at GBC 1938-50)

³¹ Interview with L.P. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1938-51)

operated the smaller manual machines. There are two possible explanations for this. Firstly the company deliberately recruited women because of a shortage of male labour in the 1950's and 1960's. (See chap. three section one for some more of management's views). Other explanations are linked to labour market conditions especially in the post-war period. The wages at GEC were too low to attract male workers. (See section one of chapter three for personnel manager's opinions on men working at GEC) And while it may have been imperative for male workers to seek work there in the interwar period, the labour shortage during the post-war period obviated the need to do that. Thirdly the Coventry labour market was deeply sexually segregated directing male workers to semi-skilled jobs in the machine tool industry, the aircraft industry and the vehicle industry where pay was better in the post-war period particularly. So how is it that it now appears that the company recruits male workers onto these jobs. I have no easy answer except to suggest that the Equal Pay Act may have encouraged the company to look at other categories of labour since male workers no longer cost more. The added advantage of employing male workers was that they could also work nights, and in view of the fact that the company operates twenty-four hours five days per week would make male workers a more feasible proposition. What might be interesting to observe would be to see if the lifting of the ban on night work for women made any substantial difference.

I will now discuss the third category of machine the automatic, which falls into two sub-categories, short and long continuous batch production and the sexual division of labour. The short batch machines were and still are run by skilled male workers. For instance I observed a situation where one skilled male worker was in charge of three machines. Two were running, while he set up a third. While the data offered by my female respondents showed that women worked on the second type of automatic in the post-war years, during my recent visit I observed only male workers on such jobs. I discussed skill demarcations with both management and the unions and while there was agreement of what constituted skilled work on the short run automatics, there was no such agreement in respect of the long run machines. It was agreed that short batch work was skilled because:

"The setter sets the up the machine, and adjusts the component according to the drawing tolerances. Included in his role is to ensure the tool and the machine that he has set up is safe."³²

By contrast definitions of work on the long continuous run automatics offered by the management and unions conflicted:

"An automatic operator once the machine is set the work would be called machine minding. They don't actually operate they just watch it and look for malfunction. Their role then is to inform the setter. They are lower grades of semi-skill."³³

While the female convenor thought differently:

"No I would not at all agree that this job has little skill, what it does show is little physical input, let me put it to you, there are several things that could happen while a batch is running and you would have to look out for, the tool breaks, a tool may need replacing, there are inspection checks, so to know about quality is important, the process could become jammed, all these things call for responsibility and some ideas about the work."³⁴

This shows that a definition of this work is still contested. In terms of the sexual division of labour according to my interview material women in the post war prized jobs on the automatics:

"First the setter set the machine to do the particular job. Well there were lots of different jobs, it was my job to see that each one was clear in the press, I mean that you had placed it properly, so that it would be unmarked. A lot of the jobs were quite easy, you just put in into the machine, and waited for it to finish, but then there were some you had to check out for faults, and you used a micrometer to see whether it was the correct height, or thickness, or whatever. Nice and easy on the automatics."³⁵

³² Interviews with the current works manager, a retired works manager and female trade union convenor.

³³ Interview with works manager. (b. unknown) (Works at OBC at present)

³⁴ Interview with female convenor.

³⁵ Interview with J.B. (b.1926) (Worked at OBC 1941-77)

This together with other interview material all suggest that women worked on the automatic machines, and this was classed as a form of semi-skilled work. On the other hand the work of the operator extended beyond machine minding, for there was an element of inspection included and the use of a tool which involved precision. I can only speculate for the absence of work on this task currently and I would suggest that perhaps the ban on women working nights may be part of the explanation, as well as the availability of male workers was now open to the company.

I will now turn to examine the construction of a job hierarchy between full and part-time women set in the 1930's. I will begin by looking at the experiences a respondent who worked an afternoon shift in the Press shop. It is significant that she had contact with full-time workers, hence she compared her situation with theirs, and as result showed some dissatisfaction:

Kate: "Can you remember anything about the size of the presses."

"Well there were all sizes, but the full-timers had those jobs on better machines."

Kate: "Were the full timers men or women."

"Mostly women except for the foreman and setters of course. Most of us part-timers had children. We'd come in to do the one to five shift. There were these big presses which yielded a bigger bonus. And there were smaller presses, but normally we part-timers didn't work those big ones. They were reserved for the full-timers. Now they would fetch a full timer off so you could get a chance. But then we were sick of it, and after some time they tried to work it so that we part-timers got a chance to work on the bigger machines once a week to push the units up. But we never got a chance on the really big ones, but there was a special machine kept for us, so we could push our units up. You see we didn't have our own machines. I mean I'd go in and somebody would be doing a job on the machine I was supposed to be on and there was nothing you could about it, and you would have to go off and do something else. But to be fair to the foreman he liked some kind of rotation where the better work was shared out."³⁶

³⁶ Interview with M.B. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1948-54)

This shows that the full-time workers were rewarded with work on the more easily operated and better paying machines. The part-time women operated the manual machines which yielded less money. However unlike the young single women in the earlier period many of the part-time women had considerable work experience often returning to work having had previous employment with the company, so in this instance part-time women were tied to unpopular poorer paying jobs when they were capable of more demanding work. This work pattern represents a shift in the composition of labour and subsequent job allocation. In the interwar period single and "green" labour worked the dolly, fly and more manually demanding presses and capstans with more experienced women working the more mechanical and automatic machines. Unlike the other important employer of female labour Courtaulds, the GBC did not operate a marriage bar, so women did not leave work on marriage but on the birth of their first child, sometimes returning to work full time afterwards depending on the family circumstances. It is feasible to conclude that those women who worked better jobs on mechanical machines were experienced. The work arrangement where women traded convenient hours for the least desirable work appeared to have been widely practiced within the company:

Kate: "Do you think that the policy of giving the more better jobs to full-timers was practiced outside the Helen St. Plant."

"It applied to all the GBC. Yes, they sorted the jobs out for the part-timers, what they could do, but the full-timers had the best money, they were prepared to stay there longer, and anyway, they wasted more, had more breaks, went to the toilet more, and the foreman always said we did more work, but you see we weren't prepared to be there all day, so it was swings and roundabout. And that in the end was why I left. They were trying to make all of us full-time at Helen St, or go to Stoke part-time. The last option was out. If we had been badly off I would work full-time but we were not"³⁷

³⁷ Interview with M.B. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1948-1954).

This comment conveyed some sense of frustration felt by the women on part-time work. Whilst they made comparatively greater efforts at work, and whilst this rhetorically at least was recognized, in practice they were not, because they did the least paying jobs, had little job security, and were the first to go in times of layoffs. The same pattern of work organization is documented by Summerfield (1977) and mentioned in Beechey and Perkins (1986).

By the 1950's then two changes had occurred. Many of the full-time low paying jobs on the manual machines had been reorganized on a part-time basis. The single and "green" female labour characteristic of the interwar period was now replaced by experienced married women in the 1950's. Very often the part-time women felt resentful being confined to the lower paid jobs. The importance of this example is that it further erodes the notion of the gender blind employer, who in this case harnesses women's domestic role into the job structure. Women's prior domestic commitment meant that in the workplace they did the least desirable jobs. In the case of part-time workers experience had little influence. The key workers in this case were the long experienced women who were available to work full-time, who had access to more interesting and better paid work on the more mechanical machines. Reliability tended to be associated more with women who were able to work full-time, a point confirmed in a discussion with the works manager:

"Well I think now that the lifting of the ban on night work on women is a step forward, it is important for women to be able to work our schedules."³⁸

From the company's perspective the ban on women to work nights prevented them from fulfilling the requirements of the work organization. On the other hand, it also shows that the company were no longer willing to organize shifts accommodating to female workers. This tendency is explained by Armstrong (West, 1982) in that capital intensive processes are more costly in terms of initial capital layout and so to ensure a return male labour is preferred. However, as I have explained there were no women on mechanical nor automatic machines at the time of my

³⁸ Interview with works manager (h. unknown) (Works at OBC at present)

visit to the factory. Therefore it remains to be seen whether the lifting of the ban on night work will open the door to women in these specific tasks in the future. Female workers in the past had carried out a wider range of jobs in this area in the immediate post war period than currently where they are confined to manually operated machines. I will now turn to examine the notion of control and the rationale for women's preference for work in the machine shop.

In my discussions with the women concerned there emerged some sense of the centrality of the role of foreman:

"Well you see, when a price was fixed you only had the foreman, the ratefixer there. And as the foreman was there all the time, I mean he was our boss, it was good to get him with us, see, I mean supposing we wanted a job retimed, I mean it was the foreman we appealed to. And you know, he knew how fast we were really. Now you had to know that not everybody works at the same speed, so you had to try, and swing it a bit. Now when the ratefixer is due, the others will say "get a good price". Well you could get a rate for a job and two women will be entirely different, one who can hurry, and one who can't, and you see the one who can't will be getting half the wages. Now, once there is a decent rate for a job you have got to keep it, and you can't let some Flash Lizzy come and undo that, so you say, 'You learn a work pace', 'let us do so many and no more', that was how you worked things. But you see the foreman might be clued into this, but after all, all he wants is the work out, and if they liked you it helped." ³⁹

The importance of the foreman is further highlighted:

"Once again some supervisors were nice, our foreman was always a bit prickly, you had days when he was in a good mood, and days when he was in one awful temper. It all depended on his mood."

Kate: "Did his mood affect you at all."

³⁹ Interview with Mrs. B. (b.1915) (Worked at GBC 1930-1951)

"Well he would probably give you horrible jobs to do. Instead of waiting and sharing the awful work, he would probably get a really awful job and give it to you."

This respondent worked on a full-time basis. The importance of the comment is that patronage with the foreman was important, because the eventual size of the wage packet hinged on it. Through job allocation the foreman in this instance was able to wield considerable authority. Other women too confirmed this:

"I mean you knew that in the machine shop you could earn more, that was how it was, everyone who worked there was able to get a bit more, I mean some people didn't want to come home smelling of oil and working on a machine, that was really factory work. There was always a better bonus there, you could earn without a headache as long as you kept in with the foreman."⁴⁰

Whilst another respondent with some experience in another section argued:

"Well, of course it was easy, in contrast to other sections you got into a kind of routine and you did the work automatic without thinking too much about it. I mean you loaded the machine and watched it and checked the rings as they came out, they were ok usually, that was it. What I mean is, well, you take a job in the wiring shop and it was a headache all the way. But in the machine shop, not a day passed without a laugh, and if the foreman was ok, then it was hunky dory."⁴¹

For those women who choose machine shop work, their choice of such jobs was based on the work, job price, and the opportunity to work in a more relaxed atmosphere where the foreman conveyed some sense of fairness in the distribution of work, and by not imposing too strict discipline. Some women however explained this in terms of the implications of the gender relationship:

⁴⁰ Interview with E.B. (Born 1930) (Worked at GBC 1962-84)

⁴⁰ Interview with M.J. (b.1917) (Worked at GBC 1935-39, 1949-55)

⁴¹ Interview with B.J. (b.1925) (Worked at GBC 1939-1968)

"I always worked in the machine shop and loved it, well, the atmosphere was always relaxed, you could have a laugh, and its nicer to work for men I think."⁴²

There were certain advantages in being a woman in a male environment; female collusion with male values earned less detailed control and gained some immediate benefits. This was one of the strategies women used to 'make out' in this context.

Edward's notion of simple control has provided an important yardstick in understanding some aspects of control in the machine shop. As my material has suggested aspects of the gender relationship within this context were seen to neutralise some aspects of discipline, and appear to have been implemented by some women in gaining access to the scarce store of better priced jobs. This does not mean that I have ignored the more arbitrary aspects of simple control, however, I consider that the women concerned utilized femininity to make immediate short term gains. The implication of this for both gender stereotyping, and control within the workplace were perhaps more problematic in the long term. (The question of resistance is discussed in chapter eight.) In understanding what was a complex process perhaps Burawoy's perspective is revealing:

"In short where games do take place, they are usually neither independent of nor in opposition to management. They emerge historically out of struggle and bargaining, but are placed within the limits defined by minimum wages and acceptable profit margins."⁴³

Within this context both the women workers and management accepted the boundaries of tolerance of their counterparts, whilst involving themselves in a relationship bound up by such a framework. The strategy of femininity on the part of the women was used to push back the more coercive aspect of the waged relationship, which was in this case the avoidance of the minimum wage through access to better paying work. In the interplay of the power relations full-time women were in a relatively better position to do this in contrast to the part-time women. That power stemmed in part from labour market conditions where the scarcity of labour placed a

⁴² Interview with B.J. (b.1925) (Worked at CIBC 1938-1968)

⁴³ *Manufacturing Consent* by M. Burawoy, p80

premium on being available to work full-time, yet the labour shortage too assisted the part-timers, because the company often re-employed the part-timers, although it should be noted that the company too gained by keeping such experienced women. Nevertheless by playing the 'gender game' and thus gaining in the immediate sense, also contributed to a specific image of the gendered worker, thus eroding the long term position of women in the workplace.

Control changed over time in that I would argue that the balance of power within the workplace had shifted during the intervening years between the 1930's-1950's in favour of the workers. But whether it was characterised by subterfuge and despotism as suggested by Roy and Edwards is not so clear. Control within the context of the machine shop environment certainly hinged on the foreman. However, whereas the foreman could afford to be despotic in the 1930s, such behaviour would not have the same payoff in the 1950s. Women who worked in the 1930s talked of arbitrary sackings and temporary layoffs, for instance, the punishment for being late was to be sent home, thus a days pay was lost, not to mention the contribution this action made to the employee's time records.

By the 1950s the more overt and arbitrary authority exerted by the foreman had been moderated, for instance women were no longer sacked on the spot, or temporarily suspended, and it would appear at this point that the culture of femininity developed in the workplace. However, such a development must be treated with caution for in this instance it was also fostered by the company (See chapter five for a fuller discussion). And while aspects of this may well appear to challenge management objectives, for instance, when the women concerned halted production to celebrate aspects of femininity, yet they failed to challenge the more arbitrary treatment meted out to part-time workers. Conflict and competition about jobs and pay was now distributed more between the full versus part-time women. As I have shown the part-time women believed they were discriminated against by being given the worst jobs when they argued they put in the most effort. This evidence suggests then that although some features of control had changed the foreman still remained pivotal in the workplace, for the women relied on patronage with him for the better jobs. In some ways the foreman then was in a position to play the full-timers off against the part-time workers, thus dividing the shop floor.

Gender and the Role of Supervision.

In this section I will examine the position of the women concerned in the role of supervision. This post constituted jobs in first line supervision, and consisted of both male and female personnel, but female supervisors did not supervise male workers, nor work in the mechanical engineering sections. At a superficial glance and from discussions with the women concerned it seemed that there was no formal division of labour, with male and female first line personnel sharing a similar job description, although women in such posts were called "key girls", while male personnel were called chargehands. However, looking at the dynamics of the chargehand-key girl relationship revealed significant distinctions, and it is this process that I now wish to explore. I will begin by looking at management's vision of this relationship.

In an interview with a works manager it seems that distinction implied in according different job titles to male and female workers for what appeared ostensibly the same job had deeper implications:

Kate: "So what is the difference between between a key girl and chargehand."

Works Manager: "The key girl reported to the chargehand, and the chargehand to the superintendent and so on."

Kate: "And what were the differences in the work they did."

Works Manager: "The chargehand's main role was to supervise, and to allocate jobs to people, while the key girl's job was to supervise duties, solving the practical problems on the section, but the chargehand's role was more in planning and tied into the management structure. The chargehand had authority over the key girl, and the key girl had virtually no authority at all, and was, and is really little more than a work hand, they are there to sort out practical difficulties as I said."

Kate: "Where did you recruit both the chargehands and the key girls."

Works Manager: "Key girls came from the shop floor, and I guess before 1965 some of our chargehands came from the shop floor and it would have to be the machine shop, or we recruited from outside. We now employ higher grade educated people for this work. I

think there is a brilliant reservoir of skills in the West Midlands now.⁴⁵

On examination then there was a more distinct sexual division of labour, denoting relations of domination and subordination which involved male and female personnel doing very different aspects of the job. Key girls and chargehands denoted distinct aspects of the same job. That difference was reflected in the job structure, channels of recruitment, in authority, and allocation of tasks. Female chargehands or key girls were selected from within the company on the basis of their practical knowledge, thus implying the significance of dexterity, were responsible for the more manual aspects of the work, had no authority and were not formally linked to the management structure; while the chargehands were recruited invariably outside the company, were employed for their delegatory skills, were relatively closer to the management hierarchy and could also be promoted. The division of labour was based on the assumption that women were employed for their manual dexterities, while the men in supervision were employed on the strength of the delegacy capacities, a view that had resonance in the immediate post war period also, for the Loudspeaker argued:

"Yes I would prefer to work for men than women. A woman in charge of a lot of women has a headache. If one is doing a better job than another, they start sulking and fall out with each other."⁴⁶

The company journal projected this view which supposedly represented the women on the shop floor and their attitudes to male and female supervision. It suggested that the view of the shop was one which visualized women as weak supervisors because women in situations where leadership and the assertion of authority was central were poor performers. The linkage made between women and sulking suggested that women were irrational and would not be able to delegate work responsibly. This would suggest that the women concerned engaged as supervisors were not employed for their communicating skills, but rather on the basis of their dexterities. And while the company needed their practical skills on the shop floor, further in the article it also

⁴⁵ Interview with works Manager (unknown) (Works at OBC at present)

⁴⁶ The Loudspeaker, March, 1958 p.47

suggested that women were not interested in promotion:

"I work for men, and I am sure that forewomen and key girls do an excellent job of work; but I'm sure women in general are less ambitious than men"⁴⁷

The picture of women projected by the company then justified the limited promotional characteristics of the internal job market by stating that women were not ambitious, and only in exceptional cases did women make good supervisors. To admit the women concerned did have aspirations and delegatory skills would perhaps mean the recognition for more opportunity for promotion, which would undermine the whole rationale behind female employment. These comments should not necessarily be taken as a reflection of female shop floor opinion bearing in mind the source of literature. There is some resonance between saying women in general were not ambitious and severely limiting promotion for women both qualitatively and quantitatively. This type of rationale in some ways confirmed the sexual division of labour for the company concerned and the way it affected the role of women as supervisors, employed as they were for their dexterities.

This pattern of limited job opportunity for the women concerned retained consistency despite the war period when women were employed as chargehands in male sections. I will now explore women's experiences of this:

"Sure I was supervisor, I trained on the shop floor, I did all the clearing on the men's skilled jobs during the war, only to be shoved to one side in the end."⁴⁸

This was the bitter experience of a woman who worked as a supervisor in the 1940s in the mechanical engineering section which included male workers only to be displaced afterwards. Other women shared a similar fate:

"Well I was a proper chargehand during the war, after all I had a lot of experience, and they needed people, well as a chargehand you made sure output met the deadline, and you hand out work, and see its done well, that all, and afterwards it was only the men who got them

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

⁴⁸ Interview with B.P. (b.1920) (Worked at GIBC 1938-49, 52-61)

job so you see in one way I was the lucky one."⁴⁰

These comments serve to demonstrate that women during the war period worked as chargehands on male sections, only to be phased out afterwards. In the post war period women became "key girls" which I have argued suggested a division of labour where the women concerned were employed for their dexterities, yet their experience showed that their role sometimes extended beyond this depending on whether first line supervision consisted of two key girls, or a key girl and a chargehand. Set in the 1960's the next comment revealed:

"The main responsibility of a key girl was sorting out the problems for the girls on the track. For example, you might have a girl waiting for components, it was up to you to sort it out. Maybe someone else was having difficulty with a component, it might be bad quality, you had to be able to see that, and change it. There were all sorts of things like that. Other times the solder was useless, or the bits on the soldering irons were worn out and rough, slowing the girl down, all these things had to be noticed. Then there were targets to be reached and if you failed to get the work out, you got the rocket. The chargehand was supposed to be involved in all of this, but he was called a chargehand because he was a man, and he thought this gave him a right over me. Well he walked about the shop doing nothing but looking very busy and that's exactly why in the end I was driven out of the job. I really loved the work at GBC, I was very good at it, and I stayed for ten years which goes to show... I worked on different sections and did all sorts of jobs I could turn my hand to anything. I loved being there having made friends all of that was important. Everything went fine. I was promoted to supervisor, but they called you a key girl, and that says something. Everything went like clockwork for a long time. Margaret was also promoted as key girl, we made friends, we worked as a team, it was a happy section, we let our section cut the usual corners so long as the work was out. Yes it was great, we tried to be fair, share out the work, no skiving... Then Margaret decided to emigrate to Australia and then all the problems started. They brought in a new recruit, a young man I had to train him - how to

⁴⁰ Interview with E.M. (b.1910) (Worked at GBC 1938-40, 1958-73)

do the job, but I mean we didn't learn like that. Well for a start he knew nothing about the practical aspects of the work and candidly that was beneath him. It was 'women's work'. He was there to supervise, to swag about. The irony was I had taught him all he knew and he was senior to me, well you can imagine on top of that he was a real chauvinist, a woman's place was either in the kitchen or in bed. And it was in that tone he talked to me. Well it didn't work with me, there was a vacancy for a section clerk, I had no experience of clerical work, but I got the job."⁵⁰

This comment is revealing for it endorsed the earlier claim made by management that the company operated different routes in the selection, training and recruitment of supervisors for men and women. Women were discriminated against in the sense that before they had any chance of promotion, they had first to undergo years of practical work experience on the shop floor. By contrast men were directly recruited for supervisory jobs, and were exempt from shop floor work. This very real difference became evident in the practical aspects of doing the job. It became a critical feature of generating tension between the key girl and chargehand. For the respondent expressed anger and frustration -for- while she had experience and working knowledge; the engagement of a male supervisor following the resignation of her female colleague meant she lost the informal authority she hitherto enjoyed, and where her male colleague had little practical competence, nor the will to acquire it, yet wielded authority over her. And while she acknowledged that he was senior, she was resentful of the way he has used chauvinism to impose what was formally a relationship of subordination and domination. In this sense the company was responsible for the sexual division of labour and the discriminatory workplace practice. Yet the respondent in her subsequent solution appeared not to see it in quite this light, for she bitterly complained about his behaviour and attitude, and omitted to allocate responsibility to the company in discriminating against experienced women.

This theme the sense of frustration where an experienced worker faced a situation where the less competent chargehand enjoyed greater mobility was again endorsed. Other women's

⁵⁰ Interview with W.J. (b.1944) (Worked at GBC 1963-1973)

experiences concurred with Wendy, B'.... worked as supervisor in a large wiring section in Stoke, and thus argued:

"Well I was first line supervision. There was a chargehand, but you could get on without him. As he was 'above me' I had to call on him for advice."

Kate: "Can you tell me why he was above you."

That's a good question, well he was there when I was promoted from the shop floor, so..."

Kate: "Why was the chargehand better able to deal with the problems that you were."

"Ah...he wasn't. But there again I can't remember any chargehand being an ordinary wirer or whatever. They may have been ordinary workers somewhere I don't know. But he was not "made up" while I knew him, I mean like we were. You see he was supposed to know the job. The other problem was he had to chase jobs, which took him out of the section, he'd be gone for ages, off to see his girlfriend on another section while I did the work. He was worse than useless, but I kept quiet."⁵¹

The respondent appeared to be at a loss in finding an explanation for the demarcation in the work roles. She then concluded they were due to two factors. Firstly, the chargehand was already established when she was appointed, so longevity of service gave him more experience. But this did not explain the way work was allocated, and his inability to deal with certain kinds of shop floor problems. Finally she concluded that he had no practical experience. His main task was that of job chasing. This took him outside the department. As a result he enjoyed more autonomy, had freer mobility within the workplace, while the key girl carried out the task of running the section. Cumulatively these experiences were endorsed by management's explanation where it was argued earlier in the section that the company used a different rationale in the placing of female as opposed to male workers in junior supervisory roles. Women were employed for their practical experience on the shop floor, while the male supervisors for their assumed delegacy qualities. Why the focus on gender. In a very real and concrete manner the dynamics

⁵¹ Interview with B.C. (b.1948) (Worked at GBC 1963-73)

of the gender relationship disguised what essentially was discriminatory employer practices, thus diverting attention away from the root of the problem, the employer's subtle manipulation of the gender relationship, which had the effect of endorsing the position of the women concerned as subordinate workers.

A number of points needs to be made in connection with the women's consciousness. Firstly, during my discussions with this particular group of women I was given the impression that the sexual division of labour characterising the job did not arise from the job itself, but was generated by their male colleagues in an attempt to subordinate the women concerned. The women at least did not seem to be aware of any distinction in the allocation of tasks. Subsequently in discussions with the management I was informed that there was some differentiation. The importance of this point is that: the women were clearly resentful, were demoralized at such blatant discrimination, but articulated this as a gender problem, when in fact it stemmed from the workplace relations. The reason this had occurred lay with the way management presented the job and division of labour; therefore when the women became frustrated with their situation of exploitation and subordination as workers were allowed to deflect it in a gender struggle.

Gender and the Organization of Work in Inspection.

In this section I will examine the women's experiences of work as inspectors. Two issues will be explored within this context, the sexual division of labour and the apparent gender stereotyping of some of the higher grade inspection work.

Inspection jobs were organized into two broad categories, patrol and batch inspection. A fairly entrenched sexual division of labour characterised the organization of this work, for women worked predominantly as batch inspectors, while men became patrol inspectors with the exception of the war period when women did this job also. One of the biggest differences between the jobs were, that one was mobile, and better paid, while batch inspection was labour intensive and involved women working at single benches examining batches of work, and was less well paid. Ostensibly the work involved in patrol inspection and other higher grades was said to require a greater degree of technical competence, for it involved the use of measuring gauges and other instruments in a wider range of jobs, while batch inspection also involved the use of some technical equipment in the examination of batches of work as it came off production. Women were said not to be capable of the higher grade work. Technical difference then was said to be the reason for the sexual division of labour. Ostensibly then it seems that male workers were employed for their technical comprehension and women for their dexterities. My interview material contested that such explanations justify the distinctions.

I will begin by looking at management's perspective concerning the sexual division of labour and their rationalization of the employment of women in the lower grades of inspection work:

Works Manager: "We had both male and female inspectors there was no difference just grades and shades of difference."

Kate: "If there was very little difference, why did you not put them all on the same grade."

Works Manager: "The reason was you can't link your *modus operandi* on one set of people male or female. You have got to be free to choose the best. And that is why there are different grades."

Kate: "So you choose the best male and female inspectors on the basis of technical merit, but you allocated them to slightly different work. Why?"

In this discussion a former works manager argued that while there were differences reflected in grades and that the difference in competence remained superficial. And at this point a former manager personnel intervened to equivocate:

Personnel Manager: "Well this is where I have to disagree with Tom, I think there was a difference between say patrol inspection and other skilled types of work in comparison with batch inspection. Our male inspectors on these jobs were doing a very different function to women on batch. Now you got your skilled men like the Jim Bannons of this world, and I mean they were trained to use micrometers, depth gauges, and all sorts of things, which I am not saying women could not do, but we didn't let them. Now our women on batch did the simple visual inspection, whereas the male inspectors did the more complex technical work. The women could use "a go and no go gauge" which is simply offering the article to the gauge, and if the article slips through it is passed and if it doesn't it is rejected. And that was routine in those days because quality control meant that every component was individually checked. So to me that was the technical difference."

Works Manager: "It is simply the case that Mac takes a different point of view to me."⁵³

In this extract there was some equivocation on the part of the works manager that the differences were so great that they required different grading, but appeared to suggest that in order to attract male and female workers a hierarchical system of grading was required. In contrast the personnel manager argued that there was a significant difference between the kinds of inspection work allocated to male workers vis a vis female workers. This difference was rooted in technical competence required in the use of measuring instruments particularly in the some of the higher graded work including patrol inspection. He further argued that although this work was reserved for male workers only, women were also capable of doing it given the opportunity. My evidence

⁵³ Interviews with former Works Manager and former Personnel Manager.

shows that women during the war period worked as patrol inspectors. It is their experiences of this that I will now explore.

Referring to the 1940's I will begin by looking at the experience of a respondent representative of the older cohort who worked as a patrol inspector:

"Well I had been there some time when I was asked to do the inspection work in the tool-room, well. It was checking out what the fitters and skilled men did. At first they did not like it as there was a slip of girl rejecting and sending their work back to them. Anyway I learned a lot from being there and it was around 1940 that they made me in charge, well I had twelve girls doing the work all sitting down and me being in charge checking their work. I had a lot of work experience from the experimental shop that was work before they send the thing to production and then a time in the jobbing shop and then inspection. They would say to me "Ptm can you do that", and I was able. So as I said they gave me this very high grade job on patrol, with me as the chief inspector. You see I could use all the gauges and such... Anyway after the war was over they done the dirty on me. I nearly got a nervous breakdown. In 1945 they started sending students to me. What I didn't realise was that they were picking my brains to learn the job. Well I can't really remember exactly what happened but they had this young fella with me....Anyway they were going to promote him to my job....put him charge if you see what I mean. Well I had been what they called patrol inspector as well as a sort of key girl, I had all that experience. And I didn't know what to do, so I thought I'd leave, but they wouldn't let me, so they put me in the paint shop testing for the depth of paint on metal, well I never had any chemistry or anything so, anyway it was very bad, the room was small. The other problem was they did not want to give me the same money... and they couldn't sack me. I got very depressed. I couldn't stick it, I mean sticking pieces of metal into paint all day, after fifteen years experience. Anyway I went home one day and I was so depressed George said go to, Dr. Bradley, he gave me a note, and that was how I left."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Interview with E.P. (b.1920) (Worked at GBC 1938-49, 1954-61)

This was a most obvious example of the kind of discrimination endured by the women. This particular woman having learned particular skills during the war sufficient to allow to take positions of responsibility such as patrol inspection and the teaching of those skills to new male recruits post-war was then demoted and replaced by the recruit she has trained.

In the next extract the respondent although she said she was employed as a patrol inspector and shared the job with a male colleague explained how features of the partnership represented relations of domination and subordination:

"I became a key girl on Patrol Inspection, that was in the Stoke Plant in 1941. It was when production output stepped up during the war. There was a huge amount of work coming off the presses and at first all the inspection was done by men. Then I was asked to work with the Head. I would be the same as him, I mean I'd do the same work. Well I had been key girl and even so, I knew he didn't like me being the same as him. All we had to do was to walk around and test the work. We had responsibility for the output."

Kate: "Was there any differences in the work you did, you were supposed to do the same job."

"Well you see although we did the same, he was there before me, and I always asked him about jobs, so he felt he was over me, me being his assistant like, and it worked out just fine like that."⁵⁵

While this respondent suggests she was employed on a grade equivalent to her male colleague yet appeared to adopt a deferent attitude towards her male colleague in the interests of sustaining a cordial working relationship. The working partnership reflected relations of domination and subordination. In order to suppress the possibility of conflict this respondent learned not to overstep the mark in what was conventionally a job reserved for male workers. Accounts from other women too suggested that this arrangement became part of the workplace practice endorsed through pay differentials:

⁵⁵ Interview with L.F. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1938-50)

"I became a Patrol Inspector in 1941. It was when production output stepped up during the war. They used to have men doing that job, but because of the shortagethey put women on it. All I had to do then was to walk around and test the work. We had responsibility for the quality of output. Anyway the other inspector got more money because although I did the same work I was his assistant and it worked out fine."⁵⁶

This comment endorsed the previous point in that women worked as patrol inspectors where this respondent also carried out the same work as her male colleague but tacitly accepted a role as his assistant. This also suggests that there were pay differentials between male and female inspectors which failed to recognize female technical competence. This issue was raised by a shop floor representative who argued:

"The majority of our women inspectors are fully trained in the use of micrometers, vernier depths, height tool gauges, clock readings, all possess a good working knowledge of decimals and fractions, the latter being essential to anyone working from a blueprint. Our intelligence, common sense and general usefulness goes apparently unnoticed."⁵⁷

This assertion that women were technically competent has been made by a female steward and provided a glimpse of the resentment felt by the women concerned. It also challenged the previous accounts that women were confined to routine inspection work which required a lesser degree of technical competence. Not only were the women concerned not recognized for their skills and compromised into subordinate positions when faced with male colleagues; male workers too on the shop floor were not always prepared to accept them in senior inspection roles:

"I came to GEC sometime in the 1930, I mean then there was a lot of this hand work, I mean you worked at a bench on small components. Now there is a lot to learn about that work, but people didn't always see it like that. I mean I was on soldering and wiring sections, later when the war started, a lot of people left for the better money including the men from the machine shops. I was asked to go there and learn to inspect the work there. I had

⁵⁶ Interview with E.O. (b.1920) (Worked at GEC 1938-45)

⁵⁷ Fortnightly Works Conference Minutes, July, 1943

an eye for detail they said, and I could use the verniers and all the other gauges, now the thing I didn't like was I had to reject other peoples work, and say it was no good, well not in those words. And again after some time I became a patrol inspector in the quality end of the machine shop, really giving the final go ahead for a lot of the work. Well you can always tell a woman maybe about this or that, but the men flew off the handle, and would say 'a b..... woman rejecting my work.' Anyway this went on and of course sometime in 1946 or so, I was asked to do another job, not on inspection at all, they then said my job was for the trainees, well the apprentices, that was supposed to be the way they learned. Anyway I left and went to work in a shop. But that's how it was.³⁸

In contrast to the former respondent this woman worked without the help of a male colleague and recalled the difficulties encountered when refusing to pass some of the work. The manner in which her decisions had been challenged echoed aspects of gender subordination, where male production workers resented mere 'women' rejecting their work. So far I have documented the experiences of some of the women who worked in senior inspector posts and documented the nature of the opposition, and discrimination they encountered. Such work opportunities for women were not available in the post war period, when women became batch inspectors and were appointed to the more opaque position of "fault girl."

The 1950s witnessed a change as women were no longer appointed to patrol inspection. Batch Inspection was much more typical of the work women did, it was closer to the processes carried out on the shop floor. A batch inspector worked at a fixed station and the work delivered to her. The Loudspeaker described the work in 1958 as very "precise"³⁹

The skills required for this job were that the operator be familiar in the use of a varied number of testing instruments. They included optical comparison in the examination of very small parts and intricate shapes. Examination was made possible by means of the shadow of the actual component being enlarged several times in size projected on top of a large drawing. The

³⁸ Interview T.A. (b.1923) (Worked at GBC 1941-46)

³⁹ The Loudspeaker, Feb. 1958, p32

skill involved the inspector being able to judge the margins of acceptability. In this way the inspector was responsible for the quality of the component. Skills entailed decision making, accuracy and precision. To be able to do this job effectively a great deal of concentration was necessary. The irony was that according to the women this job was more demanding than the Patrol inspection, but it was regarded as less skilled job. The women argued that the biggest difference between Patrol and Batch inspection was that the former confined the operator to a fixed station, while the Patrol inspection allowed much more mobility. Male Patrol inspectors enjoyed access to the whole of the shop floor. This I found was a recurring aspect of the organization of work at GBC.

I will give an example of some of the tasks which characterized the work female batch inspectors. An examination of the chassis of a radio provides an example. It involved both the use of a testing instrument called a "Bridge Tester" and a "Fault Chart". The operator was required to make about forty three different tests on this particular job. The faults appeared on a dial which the inspector had to be able to read and interpret. The chart provided was an aid to the process. The virtues of an inspector are celebrated in *The Loudspeaker*, for instance,

"We realized that she had not even glanced at the sheet when she cleared the chassis and our respect for her increased. Miss Gough preferred the fault clearing job to any other, for it called for individual workmanship and initiative."⁶⁰

This example was typical of bench type inspection which was labelled 'women's work'. It confined the operator to a fixed station therefore inhibiting physical mobility. The main task of the batch inspectors was to examine the work coming off the production line. According to one of the respondents this position incurred additional pressures because it expressed the intersection between incompatible goals. The job was about ensuring quality, a point which often caused friction with the production workers. In some plants like Spon Street tension was more acute between the two sections. This problem too was accentuated by the lack of training for the

⁶⁰ *The Loudspeaker*, Feb., 1958, p52

inspectors. However, the conflict was not always understood by the women as the result of the organization of production, but was rather reduced to a personal level, for instance:

"Well what used to get me down about working on inspection was that you got into all sorts of bother with the shop floor, and the Patrol inspectors came down on you as well. But they I mean the men didn't have to insist that the girls did the work, but we did. They had it easy, and I'll tell you something they didn't know half of what we knew. But they had an easier time by far. And some on the shop floor are nasty.⁶¹

This comment shows that the women in batch inspection felt resentment because they were required to ensure quality while the Patrol inspectors were relieved of this responsibility while enjoying the privilege attached to it. The other disadvantage was that they lost favour with the production workers because they were seen as directly responsible for rejecting work. Other women inspectors argued that gender played a very important role in the discrimination of the female batch inspectors concerned:

"I was clearing relays. A higher grade and naturally male inspector rejected all my work. He argued that it was wired back to front. But he did not know that a relay had a right hand and a left hand. I soon realized that the error lay with him because he did not know the difference between left and right. Anyway I got the drawings out and explained the thing to him. It showed you the drawings and the equivalent tag numbers. Anyway he said 'I didn't know that'. Well this man had training but we found out he was in the Royal Navy and was in charge of some ancillary department, so really he had no idea. But he was in no mood to accept that, so in the end the foreman had to be called. But there was no apology."

Kate: "You mean that perhaps he didn't have any training or practical work experience at the GBC?"

Kay: "Yes he was looking at my work and rejecting it. Yet he didn't know a thing about it. That was the kind of situation that we were up against all the time. He had served an

⁶¹ Interview with J.B. (b.1926) (Worked at GBC 1941-71)

apprenticeship with the Royal Navy, and because of that he was regarded as skilled."⁶²

One of the most valued features of apprenticeship schemes is that it gives its recipients ostensibly transferable skills. In this case the respondent argued that while such a qualification provided access to particular jobs it did failed to address the demands of the job. While the women were able to carry out all the production processes and make decisions about quality they were nevertheless given a subordinate status within the workplace. In some cases the women concerned were the skilled workers, but at the same time could be overshadowed by the masculine skilled label however remote the substantive aspects of the skill were from the realities of the work at GEC.

Another important facet of inspection was encapsulated under the title Fault Girl. The main responsibility of the Fault Girl was to inspect and repair the work of the batch inspectors in addition to being general trouble shooters for whole sections. Various technical problems in the section were solved by them as a matter of routine. For every twenty batch inspectors there was one Fault Girl. Only highly experienced women with knowledge of both production and inspection were selected. However, feminine identity embodied in the job title obscured the skill and expertise and experience required. The task of a Fault Girl was crucial to the overall running of the department and incurred certain pressures as Beryl recounted:

"I was on production before I was made up to a Fault Girl. Production was a lot easier in a lot of ways. The shop steward did warn me of a lot of pressure when I took the job. But you see I loved the variety and the excitement I can't really explain it. It was because it varied so much although of course the main technical part was soldering and wiring but this took many forms. And of course they sent me to visit exchanges both in Liverpool and Coventry to learn the job."

Kate: "How would you describe the job?"

⁶² Interview with K.G. (b.1922) (Worked at GEC 1958-83)

"Well it was problem solving in a very technical sense and the other nice thing about it was they I didn't have to issue any orders, tell people what to do. I was happy there"⁴³

This is another example where gender played a very important role in the segregation of women at the bottom of the internal labour market. They were essential workers and solved the day to day problems on the shop floor. They commanded a range of competences and dexterities that could only be gained through practical experience. They were entrusted to make decisions affecting both quality and production techniques. They enjoyed a level of job satisfaction not shared by women on the line. In the following account H...maps out some of the key aspects of the work:

"I worked first on Quality Control. It was a higher form of inspection. Well I was a inspector quite senior really there, but you are called a Fault Girl. It was my job to identify faults and to rectify them anywhere in my designated section. It could mean in some cases putting on a new sleeving or redoing a whole section of wiring and resoldering it. You simply had to be able to make all the necessary arrangements for replacement."

Kate: "Did that entail solving the practical problem as well as doing inspection?"

"Well when I talk of faults that could mean anywhere in the shop. I mean like having to go and help someone out. But the problem was I was on day rate, even so there was so much work to get out. Well you see I might be sat there doing a job, and the foreman or the chargehand would call on me to do something. He might say H... can you go to E5 and do a couple of solders or whatever. Now next two minutes later someone else is shouting for something. The next thing you know someone is calling for you. To be truthful you were a jack of all trades. I did, I changed tags, some as small as pins, and when they got bent it was part of my job to straighten them out. Even the superintendent might call on me. One day, for example, he took me around to the store where there was a piece of equipment waiting to be dispatched to the Post Office. He wanted to give it the "go ahead" but he

⁴³ Interview with B.B. (b.1927) (Worked at GBC 1941-79)

couldn't, he didn't know how. I had to do it while he watched, do the Final Inspection. I had to find the final drawings and show him how they were to be corrected, or checked. That was one of the things I did, it was a description of my job. You see there were only about four of us altogether, we had been trained and certificated by the Post Office, we did the inspection for them, it was us that gave the go ahead to their orders "

Kate: "And you said earlier that you were on day rate, were you graded at all."?

"Well I was on the one of the lowest of the semi-skilled grades. That was it."⁶⁴

The "fault girl" appeared to represent senior inspection, but was distinguishable from this because the women concerned were also required to clear the faulty work themselves unlike the senior male inspectors on other sections, and were called "fault girls" as an alternative to "inspector". In this sense the women concerned offered to the employers two particular kinds of skill, dexterity, practical ability and technical competence. Their experience and competence had brought little reward. In this case the particular respondent was paid according to one of the lowest of the semi-skilled grades.

The material suggested a shift in the job structure for female inspectors over the period. This was reflected in the promotion of women to the senior inspector grades during the war such as patrol inspection, an opportunity that was no longer available to them in the post war period. Jobs for women then in the inspection areas were in lower grade work such as in batch inspection. However, the new job of "fault girl" cannot be categorized so straightforwardly for it was a skillful job; encompassing technical competence in the clearing of work and practical dexterities in the repair of some of the work; in some cases the women concerned had more knowledge about the work than the supervision, but was not given the recognition through a skilled pay grade. In the discussions concerning the sexual division of labour; management could not not agree that technical competence was responsible, while the earlier evidence showed that women had technical competence when they were allowed the opportunity to work in the senior inspector grades.

⁶⁴ Interview with H.B. (b.1921) (Worked at GBC 1930-72)

On the other hand the post of "fault girl" also combined dexterities with aspects of technical competence, but remained on one of the lower semi-skilled grades. Bearing this in mind this example provided an illustration where technical competence was biased against the women concerned, and where the ethos of female dexterity appeared to have superseded.

Conclusion

In conclusion the experiences outlined and discussed in this chapter suggests a number of themes. Firstly although control did change in form, it nevertheless retained some consistency. The changing character of control was expressed in the modification of simple control through the introduction and development of technology propped up by a form of bureaucracy. Secondly the consistent features of control were gender subordination, a tight bonus system and an emphasis on work standards further tightened by technology.

It should be noted that although Edwards sees a correlation between for instance, small firms and personalised control and large firms and bureaucratic control, I would argue that this neat pairing has not been so clearly and unproblematically sustained. For instance in the case of the GEC over the period under review, the company grew from a single plant in the 1920s; expanding through merger and takeover in the post-war years, monopolising the commodity market in telecommunication, yet did not represent a unilinear picture of control. Although such an organization must be characterized as a bureaucracy, it also retained a system of modified simple control in its approach to women on the shop floor. The bureaucracy characterizing the GEC is not compatible with the Edwards typology, but was more of an administrative character organized through management. For Edwards typology discusses a particular kind of internal labour market, where rules evolve through collective bargaining and are therefore relatively independent of managerial structures, and where they often are said to benefit the workers concerned in job ladders etc. As I have explained throughout the thesis, the internal labour market at GEC did not develop along the lines of a bureaucracy characterised by vertical gradings. For the women concerned it maintained almost a horizontal structure with some vertical shaping. Substituting the formal bureaucratic control system was the informal and unwritten law of flexibility. While I would not at all suggest that this notion of flexibility did not accommodate to some extent the needs of women workers, it evolved in a rather ad hoc fashion as a response to the different and changing needs of the enterprise, while being presented to women workers on a platform of paternalism. The reason for this, I assert, is that the usual industrial relations issues, such as manning levels, work allocation and pay were almost exclusively defined by the enterprise,

and the specific issues affecting women workers, e.g. nurseries and health were backhandedly addressed through the establishment of part-time shifts, in the absence of an organized union. Organisation among women workers throughout the period under review evolved from being non-existent to being highly fragmented and sectionalised. This remained very true for women on part-time evening shifts.

Turning to simple control within the context of the GEC, control in this context must be understood in terms of a combination of shifting factors. Prior to rationalisation female workers were subject to a form of 'simple control' expressed in the role of foreman when control was personalised and tied in with the bonus system balanced I would argue by a certain amount of autonomy; the use of hand tools allowed the worker to influence not only the pace of work, but also to make decisions about the work. This period was characterised by the Taylorist strategy of the atomization of work with little technology. The introduction of technology and the 'track' undermined this pattern and laid the women more open to the demands of the line tied in with the very tight bonus system, which culminated in more clear cut work pacing. Nevertheless I wish to argue that simple control still remains important.

Thompson's notion of dimensions of control characterises control for the women concerned. Women at the GEC experienced and struggled against a diverse range of management controls: from the detailed supervision more associated with, but not exclusive to the earlier prewar period, from technology in the post war period; the impositions of the line system, the wage and more precisely the bonus system, the constant reminders to meet production demands, the pressures made on their labour power in terms of the execution of skills and competences in what were tightly regulated schedules, buttressed by the ever pervasive presence of patriarchy.

From the women's perspective the hierarchy characterizing the internal labour market was based partly on gender. Male workers held all the delegacy tasks while women were direct production on the shop floor. There was a clear demarcation between the sexes which emphasised subordination and domination, and where the line was less clear caused considerable resentment among the women.

I want to suggest that underneath this hierarchy control was uneven, embodying forms of simple and technological control. For instance, it should also be noted that first line supervision also expressed the notion of simple control. In this sense there were several different labour processes within the organization of production, and consisted of forms of personalised and technical control. Such control can be identified in the machine shop and on bench work. This I would argue is evident in the discussion by the part-time women who relied on the foreman's patronage to give them some of the better paying jobs. Likewise this theme is also evident in the discussions of bench work, where women relied on the key girl's sense of fairness in the distribution of jobs.

At the same time in the latter sections I have discussed women worker experiences in a number of contexts: their experiences of both supervision and inspection, and it would appear particularly in the latter instances that the frustration and disenchantment generated through grievances rooted in the particular job specifications was deflected in gender struggles. For the women's articulation of such grievance focussed on their male colleagues, as if the problem of discriminatory treatment was created by their behaviour. This suggests a problem for women's consciousness for the problems the women experienced with their male colleagues were symptoms of the deeper problem rooted in the discriminatory workplace conditions and job specifications characterising the women's jobs. This does not suggest that such discrimination was not challenged, but the form of such challenge was sometimes expressed as a gender grievance. Nevertheless there are occasions when such grievance was clearly understood. Having outlined some of the difficulties in the women's articulation of their grievances and problems of consciousness, in the next chapter I will focus on some instances of organized and unorganized resistance among the women concerned.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Workplace Resistance and Trade Unionism

In my discussion so far I have concentrated on the ways in which women workers at the GBC experienced management's organization and control of the work process and the division of labour. Though I have recognized that these workers were by no means the passive recipients of management actions I have not explored the active responses of workers in any systematic fashion, nor have I explored the manner in which the trade unions were seen to relate to the concerns of these women. In this chapter I will look at these aspects of the social relations of work at GBC, particularly through a discussion of such issues as equal pay, women's health and hygiene in the workplace and the provision of creches. These will be the major topics of discussion in this chapter.

Before registering the active character of the women's responses to management's policies and pressures, it is immediately necessary to confront some major difficulties in the conceptualization of such active responses. Within the labour process literature a major strand of the critique and revision of Braverman has focussed on shop floor 'resistance' to capital. However, while this theme of resistance has been pursued both in Marxist and socialist-feminist ethnographies of the workplace, such ethnographies have underlined several complexities which are glossed over in much of the more general literature.

Two related issues have been identified as of particular importance. The first concerns the extent to which responses involve aspects of accommodation or even consent as well as resistance or challenge. The issue is pinpointed particularly by Burawoy's discussion of the way in which playing the piecework 'game' may challenge the time-study man but involve consent to other features of the wage relation; but it is also raised by Beechey in that she questions how far 'playing the woman game' as a coping and survival tactic among women workers is a form of resistance when it is also involves accommodation to, and even generates consent to, gender and

thus management stereotypes. The second and related issue then concerns resistance to what? What specific aspects of management strategies or male power are actually being opposed or challenged, and is it one or both of these? How far are the active responses of women workers to the circumstances I have outlined so far challenges not only to aspects of management, but also to the powers of male workers.

Having signalled an awareness of some of the difficulties associated with an undifferentiated conception of resistance I intend to provide an explanatory discussion of the active responses of women workers to their work experience under the following sequence. Firstly before going on to document forms of resistance I will provide a necessarily somewhat schematic picture of the development of the trade union organization at the GEC, since it is in this context that forms of resistance should be understood. Secondly, I will explore those forms of low key 'resistance' which have been celebrated by recent marxist-feminist ethnographies, but with due attention to the limits of such resistance, and especially the manner in which they may form part of a wider pattern of accommodation and consent to management and to male power. (Aspects of this have already been discussed in chapter five.) Thirdly I will consider an episode of relatively unorganized challenge to management which involved the women defining their needs against management. Then, finally I will discuss the relationship of women workers to the trade unions at GEC, since they represented the formal expression of collective worker organization and resistance/accommodation to management. This will indicate that the forms of resistance and accommodation on the shop floor were influenced by the specific nature of trade union organization.

According to Employer and Works Conferences Records,¹ GEC has a long history of union organisation which dates from the 1930s, but did not become particularly effective until the 1950s. These records show that both the T&GWW and the AUEW, but particularly the AUEW made attempts to increase membership among women at the Spon Street Plant throughout the

¹ (B.R.P. 1940-65); Trade Union Records (AUEW Records 1940-65), (Modern Records, University of Warwick).

post-war period, but although the company did not adopt an overtly anti-union stand, there is some evidence that the GEC discouraged women from shopfloor organisation.

All of the forty four women interviewed had been members of a trade union at some point: five had been shop stewards, and one woman was a convenor. Most of these women had considerable experience (sometimes twenty years membership) in the unions as ordinary members and often activists (the activists being full-time rather than part-time workers). What is distinctive about my study in contrast to Pollert (1981) Coyle (1984) and to a lesser extent Cavendish (1982) and Westwood (1984) is that the women themselves occupied positions as shop stewards and convenors and thus they constituted the union on the shop-floor. However, despite the women's active participation and representation in the union, analogies can be drawn between their experiences and some of the feminist ethnographies, in their identification of similar problems of male domination, involving a failure to persuade the union to take on board issues affecting women more seriously.

In regard to the trade unions a common view among my informants was that it was a male dominated organization, which they felt failed to adequately address such central issues as low pay, whilst giving less attention to such explicitly 'woman centred' concerns as hygiene, health and child care. A long serving female shop steward articulated this viewpoint in a vigorous fashion when she complained that:

"The union was a fallacy, it worked against women and only protected its own little cliques. I can say that and I was a shop steward. You see, me I always learned to question things. I was too a single parent family. I paid the same rates, the same rent, paid the same prices for things as men. I was having to keep a daughter just the same. I always said and will always say when they debate 'the problem' of one parent families and their children growing up irresponsibly, the only problem is a shortage of money and that was the key issue and if women had money, enough of it there wouldn't be a problem. What I mean is the same as if they had a husband, partner, whatever, there wouldn't be any problem. That's how I saw it once I sat down and thought 'why am I struggling..' I mean when I first got my flat I had

to go into the green grocer and ask for two orange boxes for chairs so we could sit down, and there I was slaving away all week at GBC. If only I had been a man I'd be earning £14.00 per week instead of the £7.00 I got, and I could buy some chairs. Money was the root of the troubles".²

This view encapsulates both a perception of the respondent's labour market situation, and the union's approach to it. She asserts that for women the core of their problems is in the absence of a wage that is equivalent to a male wage, a wage which is capable of sustaining them as independent wage earners. Furthermore the respondent draws on her experience as an active shop steward and as single parent to suggest that the union as an organization had failed to take on board the issue of women as the key breadwinner's in some family situations. She points out that the low wages she received at the GBC were the root of the problem, and had she been a male worker she could have earned twice as much money thus alleviating the difficulty. While she strongly registers the problem of poor wages as a feature of the waged labour relationship, she associates this problem partly with the character of union organization at GBC. She further asserts that because of a set of established priorities; the union was committed to safeguard the male wage. This example demonstrates the problematic character of the union for the women at GBC, for despite the fact that the women were the union at plant level, collective bargaining was nevertheless dominated by a male agenda, when in this instance its narrow sectionalism is critically challenged. Whilst this was a distinctive voice my interview material suggests that this example nevertheless provides some sense of the character of women's attitudes to features of their position as workers and view of trade unionism in the later post-war decades.

In the next sections I want to explore some of the issues the women were concerned with - which I hope will at least partly explain why such women felt the union was not operating in women workers interests. I will now attempt to convey some sense of the pattern and levels of union organization among the GBC women, starting with the pre-war period and the relationship between union organization and instances of unorganized resistance. One woman offered this

² Interview with K.G. (b. 1925) (Worked at GBC 1960s-1980s)

account of the earlier phases of union organization:

"Well in the 1930s the unions had little say, and I would think that it was the same at the OBC and when I first was there in the 1940s and even well into the 1950s there was no such thing as a closed shop. In fact very little signs of a union at all. But there again when we did have one it was one where I think most people were just card carriers, and you got to be more than that. How effective a union is depends upon its members."³

Union involvement was at most fairly passive during the inter-war period, characterised by membership inaction, though in retrospect this respondent stressed the need for more active involvement. Another respondent elaborated on the role of the activist in relation to the wider membership, offering a further insight into the nature of shop floor organization:

"I had been Key Girl for some time, and they wanted me to do the union work. As hardly anyone wanted the bother of it I agreed to do it. And not every shop had the union, but I joined when I was twenty years old and I paid into the union and I have remained loyal ever since. Well my Dad was in the Labour Party and from the age of four I went around our village distributing leaflets, and I always knew politics, and when I went there first there was very little union, and of course you must remember in the 1930s the OBC didn't take 'scruffs'. It was an honour to get a job there. Anyway I think I talked about the union to the other women and they were keen for me to do it. I loved the union work, going to the meetings, and I always fought with the rate fixers for good prices. I always put the girls in the picture when the rate fixer came. I worked very hard, often I was in meetings until midnight, that would get on your nerves when are fighting for some that won't even support your efforts, I mean I left my child to do this work, but, you see, you know that is what it entails when you start, and I loved every minute of it."

Kate: "In what way do you think the unions have helped women at the OBC?"

³ Interview with M.G. (b.1923) (Worked at OBC 1940s-1960s)

"Well its like this, I never had any trouble getting women to join. And you see women they have got to be in something to protect them, to fight for them. And of course there was the odd one who didn't want to be in the unions. They saw it as downgrading, something to do with their background."

Kase: "Do you think there was any contradiction between your work as Key Girl and your union work?"

"Not really because the women wanted me to do the work, and I did organize a strike or two, but maybe there would be some cases where it would happen that the steward sometimes bossed the girls"⁴

This comment offers a number of important hints about organization during this period. Firstly, family experience served as an important influence behind this respondent's commitment suggesting that family and kin relations represented an important support for activists. Secondly consistent with the previous account, trade union organization is reported to have remained fragmented. Thirdly, support for the union among the women was fairly widespread, despite murmurs of dissatisfaction. For the respondent, clearly committed to trade unionism, the pattern of piecework payment provided an opportunity for organizing activity of a sort widely documented in the literature on payment systems but often identified with male workers (Lupton 1963), whilst the authority involved in being a key girl was not experienced as an obstacle to effective union activity. It should be noted that according to the reports the combination of steward and key girl was quite a common experience, but there was a considerable difference of opinion on how such an arrangement affected the union role. For instance, another respondent recalled a vivid recollection of some of the problems emerging from the overlap between steward and supervisory activities, and was more critical of such an arrangement and its effects on the membership:

"And the other problem at GEC was that you had to be on good terms with the foreman and 'key girls' to get a good job. To get good work you had to keep in with the supervision, and

⁴ Interview with J.L.H. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1934-40, 1948-49, 1958-73)

'key girls' were also the shop stewards, and it was no use bothering, I mean I have seen them fighting with fists because of unfairness in good jobs. I mean people would have a fist fight if they thought they were hard done by and I'm sure they were. But you see it was the key girl who gave out the work, and at the same time you were supposed to complain to her as steward. So you see where would you go"⁵

This extract provided a lucid picture of the dilemma facing any steward who took on the role of key girl. Firstly, as I have explained in a previous chapter, key girls were employed to ensure that the work was done, so although they were not given very much formal authority, part of their work involved ensuring the discipline of those women who they also represented in the role of steward. Such an arrangement deprived members of a separate channel through which grievances could be addressed. According to this account worker complaints tended to be suppressed because of this.

Against this background it is appropriate to underline some of the main features of the manner in which women workers experienced and responded to management in the pre-war period. One respondent offered a glimpse of authority and control relations in the following terms:

"Well I clearly remember that one of the things he did was to swear at you, he was very nasty, and there was a lot of young girls, you could never dream of answering back, I mean we would never answer our Dad back. And you see that's how they are boss."

Kate: "Can you remember if anyone did answer back?"

"Well you didn't because you were frightened of the foreman. We were forced to keep our jobs so silence was the motto...it was best to endure it. My sister worked at Rudge and it was the same, and there again it was hard to get another job"⁶

⁵ Interview with H.M. (b.1910) (Worked at GBC 1949-59, 63-5)

⁶ Interview with L.F. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1936-50)

This comment captures an interplay between patriarchal authority and class subordination in the process of detailed supervision by the foreman which was an important feature of the experience of the 1930s. It suggests that the subordination of women workers was buttressed by two separate but interlinked aspects of social relations: they were afraid of unemployment, and partly as a consequence they learned to tolerate the authority expressed in representations of the foreman as 'father figure'.

Such features are also evident in another comment on the experience of work discipline at OBC in the late 1930s and early 1940s:

"When I started work there it was a lot harder than when our Wendy went there, well it was a long time after me. I was one of eight children, and I was the second eldest and there wasn't a lot of money. Then it was strict. And if you went to the toilet Mr Henry timed you. We did not have breaks. I mean you had to have your tea behind the presses. He was strict. The first time you were late, he told you off. But on the second time he would send you home without pay".

Kate: "And did it happen to you?"

"No, not to me but I know girls it happened to. He was a revolting man. He used to spit all the time. And one day Daisy Hewitt told him off for that .. and you do not give cheek. In those days you got the sack on the spot for answering back".

"And can you recall people being sacked in those circumstances?"

"Well yes, it always happened, sacked, home for the day, then of course you lost a day's pay, so who lost out, you did. It was a constant irritation, you see you were just there to work and nothing else. Work then was slavery. Even so you found ways of having a laugh and a natter".⁷

This is a more elaborate description of the arbitrary power vested in the foreman. In the absence of any form of effective worker representation the decision to impose discipline was at

⁷ Interview with M.B. (b.1914) (Worked at OBC 1932-50)

the ready disposal of the foreman. Nevertheless, another side of what I have earlier termed 'gendered simple control' was sometimes revealed in its paternal character:

"When I started work first I was the youngest in the shop, and I was always sent on messages for the foreman. Well for me it was time wasting. I used to go all over the factory. I would go into the offices and if you kept your eyes open you learned a lot. You would see where things were made and get to know what the factory was about. I saw the Cabinet Shop where they made the radios, and I wasn't supposed to be there without the foreman's permission, but then he'd never give me permission. But I enjoyed it, it was like an unknown city at the age of fourteen".

"And what would happen if you overtayed?"

"Well you didn't, you timed yourself for the time it took to do the errand, and then add some, a wander here, a peer there. If you were too long they would know you were slinking off. On lovely Summer's days instead of being shut up with a soldering iron, you could enjoy the sunshine, and walk about the confines of the factory. You took your time, you went outside, you walked through the Cabinet Shop and smelled the aroma of lovely wood. You watched them working with saws and planes".²

Such skiving apparently became a core feature of unorganized resistance to 'simple control'. Learning the rules meant learning the boundaries of rule breaking, while keeping your job. The paternalistic character of simple control was sufficiently flexible to accommodate limited skiving: the limitations were drawn and sustained by the underlying threat, the fear of job loss and unemployment. It is in this context that another respondent recalled:

"Soon after I started work, the ratefixer came, and the first time I was timed, I was most nervous, you see you wouldn't possibly keep up with the speed. But as time went by you learned to slow down when the rate fixer came, but you see people were afraid of the depression and used to accept things, but after the war all that changed, and we would find

² Interview with N.B. (b.1917) (Worked at OBC 1932-71)

ways to get more money. Whereas prior to the war you didn't question anything, a job was a job. And we were working on Bank Sets, uniselectors and multiple sets, they were difficult to do, after the war we got money for that. And there were more jobs and people were less afraid. But then again being a young girl on the section I was regarded somewhat different. I was the youngest and I was sent on messages⁹

Strategies to combat the time study men were soon learned even by new recruits. Being a young female also had some advantages in the context of paternalistic control, for it should not be assumed that paternalistic control was entirely unyielding, a point made when women compared male with female supervision:

'She had only to stand on her rostrum and that was enough. But the men you always twiggle them around. I think the women supervisors were firmer, I think so, but I mean the chargehands will come in a bit heavy on you, if they know they can. But you can always give them a bit of cheek and he would say, 'I can't cope with her today'. And then went on to say, 'Do you fancy a day off tomorrow.'¹⁰

It is appropriate that these comments focus on the role of the foreman, for in the absence of machine pacing the whole weight of managerial power was mediated through him. The evidence I have outlined suggests that there was only patchy union membership, and even more limited union activity to constrain his interpretation of the employer's objectives during the inter-war period, whilst labour market conditions and patriarchal authority reinforced his power. Nevertheless women workers during this period still discovered or created some limited leeway for themselves, through youthful skiving, or mature ribaldry, or at best through efforts to hoodwink the pace setting time and motion experts.

Any interpretation of these comment has to bear in mind that such recollections summarise responses to a quite complex sequence of changes, not only in economic and political conditions, but also both age and gender relations. When young one of these respondents (C.N.) had been

⁹ Interview with L.A. (b.1926) (Worked at GBC 1933-55)

¹⁰ Interview with C.N. (b.1931) (Worked at GBC 1958-1980)

supervised by a woman and she suggests that the relationship echoed those in the class room between pupil and teacher. By contrast in the more recent period the respondent, now older, was supervised by a male. In the latter context age gives a distinctive inflection to gender relationships, as the older more experienced and confident woman challenges male pretensions in a way similar to that reported by Pollert (1981). However, as with Pollert's discussion of the way in which the banter with male supervisors was a form of resistance, a critical question concerns what exactly was achieved by these women, and what male supervision achieved by entering into this type of banter? While this respondent perceived male supervisors as easier to cope with than female supervision the impact of this was clearly limited and thus care must be taken in characterising such features as forms of resistance more than accommodation to capital.

Turning now to the post-war period, it would appear that several major changes had implications for both control and forms of resistance on the shop floor. Such changes included relative scarcity of labour, increased 'line technology', a change in the structure of the internal job market with the development of part-time work, an increase in the number of married women in the workplace, and a diminishing of the foreman's role. Furthermore the end of the war witnessed concern on the part of the unions to increase female membership,¹¹ though as the following comment suggests, membership often meant little more than paying regular contributions:

"Well you paid your dues and I guess everyone who was at work was in the union, but I was there for years, and I never remember anything much about it, but I suppose if we didn't have the union, things would be worse. Oh- I do remember we had to use this awful glue in the wiring shop in one of the jobs, anyway people got excema and conjunctivitis from using this, well the union insisted that the girls on this work went to the surgery each Friday afternoon for a check, so I would say they did more behind the scenes."¹²

¹¹ The AEUW minutes show that the union throughout this period encouraged female membership, holding educational classes geared to recruit women. See Records of AEUW, Corporation St, Coventry.

¹² Interview with B. McG. (b.1940) (Worked at CIBC 1963-70)

As this account also underlines, the implications of trade unionism were sometimes more positive: It was through shop floor organization that the issues of health and safety were raised, thus providing a benefit for the women concerned. However in their recollections of the post-war period women more often pinpointed the weakness characterizing trade union organization. One aspect of this weakness was related to the growth of part-time shifts, for a frequent complaint concerned the inadequate protection afforded to women part-time workers:

"You see I never worked for more than five hours so I had little to do with it, I think I must have been in it thought. But you see being a part-timer excludes you from a lot of things."

Kate, "How important was the union in your opinion in helping women workers?"

"I should imagine it would be better if there was a union. I imagine that if there is a union you are better in it if you could join. It is as simple as that."

Kate "Can you remember what the union did when your job came to an end?"

"Well nothing I think, you see I was offered to go to Stoke, but it was too far away."¹³

The union's perceptions of part-time work and workers appeared to legitimise the company's policy of 'flexibility', where female labour was shifted about between plant and jobs, and was relatively more susceptible to layoff and job loss. Another part-time worker expressed similar resentment whilst adding a new twist:

"Yes I belonged to the T&G when I was at BTH and before that when I was at Rotherham I was the union. I mean I made sure the girls got fair prices, I would challenge the foreman and the rate fixer on the prices. But I found things different at GEC, because if you were married they did not care what happened, and I mean the single girls were always off sick, they could afford to be, they got benefits, while we married ones didn't. The young girl who worked alongside me had a lot of time off, but she was full-time and was able to get benefits. I objected to this unfair treatment. Well actually it was against married women, and you see the part-timers were married. Now the married women part-timers did not lose

¹³ Interview with K.B. (b.1914) (Worked at GEC 1948-52)

as much time as the single girls, we had no protection and we couldn't afford to stay off. I mean the single girls would have time off to go to the hairdressers and such like. But as I said the T&C didn't bother with us, they simply didn't care for part-timers."

Kate: "Surely being a union member must have afforded you some protection."

"Well I'm certainly for unions, but even as a member and being a part-time worker should make no odds, but they had a different law for us. I know we had some protection like you had to get warnings for bad time keeping, but there again if you were a married woman and a part-timer, if your job dried up no one bothered. ...That's how it was."¹⁴

This extract develops an important argument. For, while this erstwhile woman activist suggests that part-time women were organized, she points out that the union at GBC had a different attitude and policy for part-time workers who were also married women. This respondent suggests that the union was not committed to part-time women, did little to fight to save their jobs and on a wider level neglected their needs as workers, implying that it was because the workers concerned were married women.

Others made similar points. For example:

"And there again I don't think the union was too bothered with us women. I mean they don't take account of all the one parent families, and divorced parents, and breakdowns. Now where was the union ever in calling for help for women in those circumstances, calling for better paid jobs. A woman should be able to keep a family without all that additional hardship. I, for instance, pay all the bills. I have paid the mortgage, the rates, have taxed the car, and bought the food, and on top of that I have saved. Roy says I'm a superb manager. And we don't have any secrets about money. We share everything. So why can't the union see it as it is, like that."¹⁵

¹⁴ Interview with H.H. (b.1910) (Worked at GBC 1948-59, 63-65)

¹⁵ Interview with H.G. (b.1926) (Worked at GBC, 1940-4, 1953-85)

This informant develops the argument about the union's attitude to women members in an interesting way. She suggests that the union did not take on board, or reflect, a realistic approach to women, in that they ignored the extent of women's economic contribution in the family. Thus she suggests that women's economic commitment to the family establishes their right to a living wage, (a theme which also reinforces my argument in an earlier chapter that such women rejected the notion that their individual wages were 'pin money'.)

Other women focussed more directly on the inadequacy of union organization among some part-time workers:

"When I did the twilight shift there was no shop steward, nothing, we had the worst deal of all, we always were the first to lose our jobs. The union wouldn't do a thing."¹⁶

For this woman the root of the problem lay in the union's failure to organize and protect this particular shift.¹⁷ Relative to part-time women on day shifts, the evening shifts were less likely to be organized. Furthermore this point was underlined by another respondent who drew a contrast with other workplaces:

"Well I was a cleaner at the Whitley Plant for Humber. I worked on a twilight shift cleaning the offices. The money was better, I was in the union, you see we had a shop steward, it was a steward from one of the other sections, but you see there weren't many of us, and he was good. And there again he was able to be there in the evenings, now you see I believe women cleaners got better conditions and pay than we did at GBC"¹⁸

The union at GBC was judged to be weak, then, because women in less skilled jobs in other industries on similar shifts (including unsocial hours) were seen to receive better pay and to enjoy better union protection.

¹⁶ Interview with L.B. (b.1929) (Worked at GBC 1955-57, 57-84)

¹⁷ In her study of women and trade unions Chariss (1984) found that there was a reluctance on the part of the unions to organize women on such twilight shifts

¹⁸ Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at GBC 1952-84)

Such comments underline the limitations of union representation even in the post-war period. However, despite the women's criticisms of the unions they still continued to assert the need for organization and resistance to management strategies, whilst drawing inspiration for such responses from the tactics developed in coping with men in domestic settings. The following discussion illustrates these features well:

"The section I worked in could be quite hard, you see not everyone worked at the same pace. Well it is not possible. I mean the foreman came down and howled at this one woman, well, she was a bit behind, kind of slow, not too bright. But really she was a good worker, never raised her head. Anyway they decided to take poor Nell off that section and put her somewhere else. .. Well I wasn't having any of that. The shop wasn't unionised at the time. And he (the foreman) could do that. Anyway I went to the union man in our street, and he gave me the cards. I gave them to the girls in the section and we had a union. I told the foreman and he hit the roof. And after the rumpus Nell stayed."

Kate: "Why were you able at that point to do that?"

"Well its like this, I always had to fend for myself after marriage - I was married at eighteen and had eight children by the time I was in my thirties. My husband was a miner and a drinker. We had our 'times'. He would go off to the pub. It was almost unheard of for women to go there. But if he went too often I went after him - so I stood up for myself. So at work it had to be the same".

Kate: "Did you object to your husband having a drink, and being left at home?"

"No it was not that so much, you see he spent his money there and would leave me without, he would still expect to be fed. So I had to go to get the money. I used to go and get it before he spent it, and he never wanted me to know how much he earned or anything. So to get money out of a husband is no joke."¹⁹

¹⁹ Interview with M.B. (b. 1915) (Worked at CIBC 1940s and 1950s)

This account suggests how such conflict and pressures within the domestic relationship could generate a form of self assertion which was then carried into the workplace. Such activism gave some life to the uneven and sectionalised trade union organization which was becoming established in the factory. Furthermore, such emergent organization served as context for continuing forms of unorganized resistance, and it is this aspect that I wish to explore next.

The women with experience of the GEC in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s highlighted their experiences of dealing with newer managerial initiatives such as the incorporation of technology into the structure of control. In particular their accounts of work on the line recalled the interplay between management initiatives aimed at speedup and the subversive tactics of workers in response:

"At Spon Street we had a production week which started- it began on a Friday and ended on a Thursday. We had to produce 365 sets per week. You see over the years we had become faster and faster, but of course some girls wouldn't work at all, and the work piled up. They liked to put me at the head of the track because I was the fastest, I would set the pace, well if the girls didn't want to work so hard I'd slow up and there was nothing anyone could do about that, you then complained about the 'time' of the job and maybe the job was a bad batch, you always found something. You see not everyone can work the same pace."²⁰

Thus the company's attempts to maintain and increase productivity were resisted both individually and to some extent collectively. Not only did this respondent refuse to set too fast a pace, but the views of her work colleagues were prioritized. These strategies were legitimized by contesting the 'job times', but the same women also describe how the units were more directly resisted, in ways similar to, but more elaborate than, those reported for the pre-war period:

"The work study people always came to me because I was the fastest worker, now this was very bad, but I got wise to the game, and after that I worked with the girls more in line with their speed. I got very good money for the girls using this method, because I knew what

²⁰ Interview with R.B. (b.1922) (1940-1980s) and R.M. (b.1943) (1963-68)

their speed was, and I headed the track, then I could make sure that they earned a decent wage. At first, you know, when work study came to me I would work fast, but then gradually I learned that you can't keep a fast rate all the time. I slowed down, but they are rotten, for when you first got into a factory you don't know anything, and you are nervous, and because of that being watched you will be more nervous and will work faster, they know this and never say a word. Then you are there for some time and you learn to slow up, and you turn that on them, because, you like them will keep cool and find the longest way to do the thing. In the end I was sure the times were fair because I went for a time that would suit the slowest girl."²¹

This account provides a vivid example of how workplace experience led to the development of a workplace consciousness and a sense of worker solidarity, as women attempted to control the price of jobs and the allocation of units. Other instances of resistance included forms of sabotage:

"Well there you were pumping out more and more of the same boring thing, not knowing or indeed caring what it was for, but you were there to do just that. And we got thoroughly fed up. We would throw our shoes at the track, drop components into it, clog it up, then the bl... thing would grind to a halt, the foreman would call the engineer, we sit down and wait, the engineer would explain, then it would appear that we were negligent and would get told off. The track would start again, and there you were off again."²²

The above accounts of countermoves in response to management pressure on work pace and job times suggest strong parallels with the responses of many male workers, although there has been little identification and analysis of these forms of resistance among women workers. However, having noted parallels between patterns of resistance developed by women at the GBC and those discussed in the literature on male workers, it is important not to suppress the salience of women's distinctive experience outside wage work for the tactics they adopted at the factory.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview with C.J. (b.1942) (Worked at GBC 1960s)

This was registered by one of the older women who stressed the importance of beating the line:

"Well it was in Spon Street that they liked to work you until you dropped, but I mean we had half a day's work done before we came to work. Anyway by four o'clock you were thinking about going home and what was to be done. And we had a system there then that if we wanted to rest we slowed things up. Well the job on this line took one and a half minutes, and one day quiss by accident some Kleenex tissues got somehow in the way and slowed the thing up. We then did that almost every day in the afternoon, and it is possible because then even the hoases are less eager. And at other times if we wanted a smoke or something we would do it. Mind you that was in 1960, so I can't say how long that went on. But I ask you, how were you supposed to keep going. I mean when most men get home they expect to put their feet up and relax, whereas we have to dash off to shop, and then cook."23

Comments such as this suggests that the logic of such forms of unorganized resistance reflected the combined demands of both home and work. At its most basic some energy had to be reserved to deal with the demands made on these women in the course of their domestic duties.

Whilst one theme of my informants comments concerned such informal and limited resistance to management pressures, they also provide reports of attempts by the union and by the women themselves to develop and extend union organization and organized challenges against management. In one reported instance women workers went out on strike from the Spon Street Plant over the company's non-recognition of two women convenors:

"Dispute over Stewards, 1,500 Walk Out at Two GEC factories. About 1,500 workers mostly women walked out of the GEC this morning because of a dispute concerning two women chief stewards. After a mass meeting on waste ground near the Spon Street factory they returned to work but threatened to walk out again this afternoon if the management did not agree to recognize the stewards. Mr. Williams convenor for the two factories said this

²³ Interviews with B.B. (b.1922) (Worked at GEC 1947-51, 1952-57) and M.P. (b.1944) (Worked at GEC 1960s-1980s)

in July the management had agreed to recognize two women leading shop stewards. Now they were repudiating that agreement on the grounds that there was no need for two women chief stewards because there was sufficient sectional stewards.²⁴

After a second walkout and threats of a third, the company conceded recognition to the stewards for a further week pending further discussions. This episode also suggests that GEC, faced with such organizing efforts, sought to minimize the active participation of women workers in the union.²⁵

Having set the scene by comparing facets of organized and unorganized resistance in the pre and post-war periods, I will now use my interview material to attempt to chart in more detail some of the organized union responses to management initiatives and particularly these will involve women stewards. This will include discussions of typical workplace issues like pay and redundancy, and also working conditions where women begin to make limited demands specifically as women workers.

It should be noted that my evidence relating to these matters rests on the testimony of these women who were activists in the union. My decision to concentrate on the activists evolved during interviewing, when such women sought to highlight their level of interest and participation in the union. Although I did not seek to identify such a group they simply emerged in the research process, by providing fuller, more informative accounts of the union and their particular workplace. In some ways I view them as key informants and while they may not reflect a general view, they offer an interesting perspective on issues they considered crucial to women in workplace bargaining process, and as such provided a more positive and critical account of the union at GEC. At the same time they also indicate something of the wider patterns of attitudes and responses among the female workforce whom they represented.

²⁴ Coventry Evening Telegraph, 17-11-1955, p.1, c5,6. Local History Archive- Broadgate House, Coventry

²⁵ Further accounts of threatening, obstructing and disciplining union activists are outlined in the Works Minutes, ALUEW Records, Corporation of Coventry, 1939-1965

Strikes against pay and job prices were a recognized part of labour relations. As Edie, a long serving steward recalled:

"Well I can think of the time we had a strike in our shop about some job that was unfairly priced, but then there was a lot of work like that about. We had decided to have a one day stoppage. It was one of those jobs where you put in a lot of effort and at the end of the week you had the smallest bonus. We decided on a one day stoppage, short and sharp, we thought. Anyway there was a certain woman in our shop, and she crossed the picket line and went on in. But you see they don't get anywhere, and were the sort who refused to stand by you, but then when we achieved something like in this case an improved price, and better working conditions, they were more than ready to accept it. But here again they were the ones to suffer for their disloyalty. I mean it was terrible for them to be isolated as 'blacklegs.' I mean the girls would get a black chicken leg and send it around the shop to them. What they would do also was to get a black stocking and pad it and send it along to the person. Yes I have seen it done. It made you wonder how they managed to sell out their mates."²⁶

This example serves to demonstrate that the women concerned felt a sense of grievance in connection with pay, and were prepared to demand what they believed to be their rights as workers. It also demonstrates that women were prepared to take action against picket breakers, by later ostracizing them. In the next extract another woman steward recalls a strike which centered on a dispute about the price of 'skilled' work:

"When I was a steward, a strike started on the first floor of the Spon Street plant. It was all about six girls wiring Tulip Tags. This was a skilled job. Well an ordinary tag just sticks up like a pin, but a Tulip Tag has four to six protruding pins, the trouble is when you wrap the wire around, and then you have to go over it with a soldering iron, the trouble starts. If you are not careful with the second one, the wire burns, because they are spaced very close

²⁶ Interview with R.H. (b.1914) (Worked at GBC 1634-40, 46-9, 58-73)

together. Now you get four of these on a tag, and indeed it is a very difficult job to do properly. On this job the girls were earning considerably less a week than the other girls. Having taken so much care to do this they were losing out on the piecework rates. The case had been argued for by the shop steward committee for a full fourteen months, but the management still refused to budge. Eventually the confrontation led to a strike. The unions idea of defending those girls was to put a picket from 7.30 to 5.30 in the evening. Well of course the management could do what it liked in the evening. You see the union don't go very far to defend women. Anyway my friend Elsie who was a convenor decided that we should organise a twenty four hour picket, all day, all night, and at weekends. This stopped supplies coming into the factory and everyone was laid off. Now you see the other sections should have joined the strike before, but that lasted five weeks. It was very hard. I had my daughter to support and I couldn't get any help, except for some money for my daughter. I was unable to pay the rent, and had to make a token payment....I was with the strikers the full way. Anyway in the end, it was settled, the girls got a guaranteed rate for that job, instead of being on piecework. What they got was the average pay, because they were still behind the girls on piecework. In my own view we lost out, but then it was women and no one wants to take you too seriously. That is what we were up against."²⁷

In this extract the respondent conveys a sense that the struggle by women in the workplace takes place on two fronts, against the intransigence of management, and in the face of what she perceives as the reluctance of trade unions to extend solidarity to women workers. In this case the women stewards took over the organization of a strike from the union, to organize pickets over longer periods and make the sanctions effective. My informant also argues that the union should have extended the strike to include other sections in their support. In many ways this comment echoes the critiques which are also made by male workers against the union officialdom, and emphasises the division between the shop floor union and the official union. However, in this case the female shop stewards also regard the union action more specifically as

²⁷ Interview with E.G. (b.1922) (Worked at GBC 1938-84)

evidence of its reluctance to defend and support women's rights in the workplace.

This comment also has another important dimension to it. The strike was essentially about pay rates for 'skilled wirens' who had been underpaid in contrast to other production workers. The particular job involved a lot of detailed hand work which required attention and careful performance, and as a result the women were earning poor rates, for the company rewarded speed, which is a different kind of requirement. In the end the management conceded a fixed rate for this job, equivalent to average pay rates. This is an important example for it highlights the arguments developed in the second section of chapter six where I suggested that other competences beyond that of speed were required in the hand operated assembly sections.

This extract lucidly shows that even when women are the union at shopfloor level they may still feel a sense of frustration, grievance and marginalisation in relation to the higher levels of union structure. Such a lack of confidence and trust also arose from a sense that women had been systematically cheated of Equal Pay. The next comment captures the views of many of the female stewards on this issue:

"Well I know that we are better off since they introduced Equal Pay, but equal to what, no we are not equal to anyone, and I'll tell you how that came about. Barbara Castle gave the management a whole year to come up with how to give us Equal Pay, but what they did instead was to find ways of not paying us, and it was a piece of cake at GEC, after all who could they compare us with."²⁸

In the opinion of this steward the government had increased the difficulty for the unions in fighting for Equal Pay, for they had misjudged the employers' intentions, and the employers had taken this respite as an opportunity to evade the principle. The question of comparability became the central focus of policy - whether the women concerned were doing the same jobs as male colleagues - but in the case of the GEC, as in many other workplaces, a highly entrenched division of labour already existed, and there were few women doing the same or similar work to male

²⁸ Interview with H.O. (b.1925) (Worked at GEC 1930-70s)

colleagues. Furthermore, where men and women did similar work, as in both inspection and supervision, a variety of sometimes superficial distinctions were drawn between the jobs, not least in regards to methods of payment. This situation is vividly illustrated in the next extract:

"Well when the Equal Pay issue was a hot potato I was shop steward, and this is what has happened, we have improved our wages through the grading system, because it's supposed to be according to the job you do. Well I was fighting for Equal Pay for women on Inspection, but the problem was there were no men on inspection, they worked on Test. They were on 'staff' and we were not. They got salaries, so they naturally got the higher gradings."

Kate "But men worked as inspectors in other industries locally, in the motor industry, and that is also engineering isn't it, and must involve similar processes."

"Sure that is true, but the OBC was different work, there were no men there on the same inspection so we couldn't do anything." ²⁹

This shows that the implementation of the comparability principle was difficult to enforce in a situation where rigid sexual segregation was well established. Segregation then became an instrument in management's hands, and was used to further reinforce this structure. Ironically during my discussions with management I was informed by a middle manager that:

"I don't know if you have been told this but we had no problem in agreeing that women should have Equal Pay, I mean it's only fair." ³⁰

While a senior personnel manager reminded me:

"We introduced Equal Pay right away, we were the first employers to do that."

Kate: "Why was that possible"

"Well we had a long tradition of employing women and we felt it was right, morally right, that is."

²⁹ Interview with H.G. (b.1925) (Worked at OBC 1950-70s)

³⁰ Interview with a current works manager.

Kate: "I understand that you were involved in the Equal Pay negotiations with the unions, can you explain a little about the question of comparability, I mean most of jobs were done exclusively by women, so which category of male worker did you compare with a woman who did manual wiring, for instance?"

"Well now you see there were many jobs that could not be compared with what the male workers did, I mean we have maintenance workers and there are no women there, and then of course we had skilled men like toolmakers and setters, and again there were no women there. These are skilled grades."

Kate: "So on what basis did you assess the women, if there were no comparable model, did you assess them on worth, I mean in the sense that although the work they were doing was perhaps different, could you not have said that perhaps it was work equal to some category of work which engaged male workers?"³¹

At the end of a fairly long discussion interrupted frequently by the telephone the manager refused to answer this question directly. I met with considerable evasion in terms of what Equal Pay meant from the company perspective.

While managers were prepared to say which categories of skilled workers were non-comparable to the women concerned, they were not prepared to say which category of male workers served as the comparability model. Discussions with some of the female stewards, as well as some of the other women, proved to be more enlightening:

"Well all Equal Pay meant was that we were compared with the lowest grade male workers, the male labourers who swept up the floor, and I'll tell another thing that's all the T&GWU asked either."³²

This is an important comment for it throws light not only on management practice but also on the union's perspective on parity for the women concerned. Women were seen as a homogeneous group, and as such were compared to male labourers. Indeed it appears that this was the

³¹ Interview with senior personnel manager (h. unknown) (Works at GEC 1963 grams)

³² Interview with L.W. (h. 1927) (Works at GEC 1952-84)

starting premise for the T&GWU, though the women report attempts to upgrade some jobs. Indeed these attempts in turn meant equivocation and lack of support from the AUEW:

"Well I remember the time we had this job, it was a job that involved some inspection and then repair, and we were fighting for a high grading and the unions agreed it should be on a higher grade, it was one of these that the average woman couldn't do. Anyway they baggled and haggled and the management wouldn't let go, they wanted it on a F grade. We wanted a higher grade. Anyway the convenor said it should go to arbitration and the AUEW convenor said he would go to Birmingham and speak for us and demand a skilled grade. Can you imagine when we got there he said to the meeting 'I don't want these women to have a higher grade, they are not skilled in any sense of the word'. We reckoned he had been in management's pocket all the time."

"Can you explain a little about the grading."

"Grading started from A-M, A being the lowest grade, now grade E was equivalent to the shop labourer, and all they could demand for us skilled women was, at the most, grades F and G: now you see they didn't go far, because those grades were the two lowest of the semi-skilled grades. But the union wouldn't back anything more, and said we had to accept it and all that."³³

According to the evidence the convenor in this case was only prepared to concede that the work was semi-skilled, and that the women concerned were worthy of the lowest of the semi-skilled grades. One of my informants clearly identified such policies as the result of both craft and male interests:

"But you see as far as the question of skilled grades was concerned it was never something the unions thought about getting us. As far as the AUEW was concerned it was a question of protection, protecting their skills in their own terms, do you understand. But you know that by upholding this attitude they were assisting the GEC management, and indeed they

³³ Interview with H.B. (h. 1928) (Worked in GEC 1938-83)

were not the only ones. Well take another example, Equal Pay and indeed Barbara Castle is responsible for this, she gave the companies a whole year to organise. This time provided the company and the unions... they fought like the devil to protect men, women did not get into positions where they were equal to men. Women were put on jobs where there were absolutely no men. The object of this was to prevent women from using comparability with effect. You see men were put on jobs that were said to deserve higher grades. You see that's how we lost out on that."³⁴

Women felt that it was not only the chauvinism of shop floor organisation that prevented them from achieving recognition of their abilities and skills, for the patterns of management and union responses appeared to form part of a combined institutional strategy which extended from the government of the day to the employers and denied women real parity in pay with male workers. Furthermore in some cases where women had achieved Grade G, the higher of the semi-skilled grades, the employers implemented strategies which undermined this:

"I'm now at the Helen Street plant, and I'm on a lower grade since I came there from Stoke, you see at Stoke I was on a higher grade. I'm on grade F now and at Stoke I was on Grade G, you see, the job was graded differently, and we were all knocked down. But you see they shifted all that work to Helen Street where it was paid on a lower grade."

Kate "So why was it that you did not insist on being given the same grade, after all you were doing the same work?"

"Because the union had made an agreement at Helen Street, and they wouldn't fight to change it, and we were obliged to abide by it. And apart from that, when you are paid according to G Grade you have to do the soldering, so they get extra out of you. And you see there are only three people who can do my job and I got special training."³⁵

This respondent clearly identifies an erosion of conditions deriving from company policy and union passivity, a deterioration which underlines both the significance of gender

³⁴ Interview with K.C. (h.1922) (Worked at GBC 1958-84)

³⁵ Interview with E.B. (h.1927) (Worked at GBC 1958-83)

discrimination documented earlier and the manner in which this gives a particular twist to patterns of class subordination and exploitation. It was not possible for me to investigate further the conditions whereby the unions at the Helen Street plant negotiated a different agreement, but such women as my informant saw it as evidence of the importance of the union, underlined by its clear inability to act against the transference of whole sections to plants where lower rates were in operation, or to protect the grading of the workers concerned. In part this example reflected one of the weaknesses of single plant agreements between the union and particular plant managements as opposed to sustaining an overall union company agreement, and in this sense such problems may be shared by male workers, though the wider framework of job segregation also remains relevant.

Overall the women's experiences of their struggle for Equal Pay resulted in a situation captured in the following extract:

"Well I have only about another year to go at work. Women that work with my husband get equal pay. I mean since Roy partially lost his sight he does packing and the girl who works with him gets the same. Now they work at Talbot. But take me, I have been there at the GEC for nearly forty years and we are on low wages. And they were always low even when I did skilled work, the work I do now isn't so skilled. Well of course the wages are not as low as the sweatshops. But my husband gets far more than I do for doing packing. But there again we always lost out on money at the GEC. And they pulled a fast one when it was time to give us equal pay. Their excuse was that there were no men doing our jobs that they could compare us with. Now this is a rubbish idea, you see the proper thing to do was to examine what we did and pay us on merit"³⁶

This comment highlights the frustration and sense of discrimination felt by the women concerning the question of Equal Pay at GEC, where, in a predominantly female workplace, they made even less headway than women elsewhere in the local labour market. While they place the

³⁶ Interview with H.G. (b. 1926) (Worked at GEC 1941-45, 1950-80)

major blame for this on the combination of employer strategies and government collusion, they also argue that the trades unions in this case were primarily preserving the interests of their male membership, thus endorsing the status of women as low paid workers. The most the women achieved was parity with the lower of the semi-skilled male grades.³⁷

The conflicts and disappointments over the issues of pay and grading represented one important facet of the employment and trade union experience of these women at the GEC. The issues of redundancy and plant closures were also an important part of their experience as wage workers, and a significant feature of my discussions with these women. In their experience as workers the women discovered that management objectives were not just related to production and increased output, but equally with controlling and cutting the cost of labour, if necessary in a plant closure:

"You see the GEC was a factory that employed women. And they liked married women because they knew we were tied to the home, its a difficult situation to be in, but management liked it like that. After all, married women are the best cheap labour in the world. If it came to men they wouldn't do it, but the unions wouldn't expect them to do it. And I will now tell you a story. We had at Raglan Street, a really well organised union, a couple of good stewards, and a convenor. I don't think the management thought we could be as efficient as men in terms of production. Well about fifteen years ago, or maybe more, they asked us to work hard, told us the sky was the limit. We aimed for that. As I said we had a good set of stewards, and a convenor who wasn't in the managements' pockets. And the women stewards had been told that there was no ceiling on output, in terms of the units we were allowed to earn. Now we worked with that in mind, and women there at the time were earning more than the men in the motor industry, that was a turn up for the books. We had sorted it out. I'm talking about women doing piecework. So to stop us earning over the limit they decided to transfer the job to Treforest. It was taken from us. We fought and

³⁷ See Stull and McIninch in *Waged Work A Reader*, ed Feminist Review (1986) pp 15-26 for further elaboration of this issue, emphasising the importance of job structures and job segregation in the persistence of pay inequalities.

fought and stayed on strike for fourteen weeks. In the end they simply closed the Raglan Street plant down.³⁸

This extract provides an insight into a situation where the women not only constituted the union membership, but also an effective trade union organization on the shop floor, and recounts the unfolding efforts made by the women to earn a living wage, keep their jobs and meet the employer's objectives. However, from this steward's perspective, it was not simply productivity the employer wanted, but control over the women to enforce a system of cheap wages. This may be gleaned from the steward's opinion that wages for the women concerned had improved through their effective collective organization on the shop floor. Management sought to undermine this and, although the organized women continued their struggle in strike action, they lost. Their plant was closed while jobs went to an area where labour costs were considered to be lower.

This comment also suggests a sharp and sophisticated worker consciousness among some of these long experienced women workers. This is marked in part by a loyalty to the principle of trade union organization despite reservations about some of the attitudes and tactics they had experienced. Collective organization remained the way forward in the challenge to management, for it had the power to improve, temporarily at least, members' pay and conditions. The necessity of organization was also conveyed by other women who pointed out that, while it may not always be able to save jobs, it helped to mediate the conditions in which jobs were lost:

"Well you have to fight for everything, don't expect anything for nothing, now you see with all this new technology they wanted to make people redundant. Way back in the 1950s, they would have just laid people off, and that would have been it, now things are different. I'm in the union, always was, I don't like free loaders, I mean we fight for the rights and they benefit and don't support us.....As I say they were making people redundant a few years ago, and the GBC will only pay the absolute minimum amount of redundancy money. Not like the Coal Board who pay thousands of pounds. They were only giving one year, no

³⁸ Interview with L.W. (b.1927) (Worked at GBC 1952-84)

more, so we decided to fight for more. We women organised, took action like sitting in, and blocking doors, this is more effective than walking out. They can't take on scabs. In the end they increased the offer by one half. But ironically they didn't sack anyone from Spon Street where we took action, they made the people at Helen Street go instead. They got the extra redundancy money at Helen Street. I felt very bitter, because afterwards the girls at Helen Street wouldn't help us fight for the money we had lost. I mean my action for more redundancy money had landed me with two High Court injunctions. But we did not walk out, we just patrolled the factory with placards, blocked throughways, and went and sat in the managers office. But our jobs were saved, and the redundancy money was increased.³⁰

A number of themes deserve attention here. Firstly, this serves as an example of the high level of collective activity which could be developed within the workplace. Clearly women have been successful in getting the union established at the GEC, despite the fact that the company discouraged this especially in the Spon Street plant. These active and organized responses to management challenges serve as examples of women's participation in defending conventional workplace issues like jobs and decent redundancy pay. Secondly this account demonstrates the imagination and sophistication of the women's strategies. Instead of walking out the women occupied the premises, highlighting their cause by assembling and blocking doorways. Production was disrupted and the women's occupation of the workplace kept them in contact with the changing situation, thus giving them more leverage. Thirdly it is evident that levels of workplace organization remained uneven between plants and thus there was a complex interplay between sectionalism and solidarity. Finally, though they saved the jobs at the Spon Street plant and marginally increased the redundancy payment, this was a temporary victory, for the struggle continued to keep jobs at the Spon Street plant.

Whilst the above comment highlights the active and imaginative struggles of women union members against management policies which sought to reinforce their position as insecure low

³⁰ Interview with H.B. (b.1937) (Worked at GEC 1963-84)

wage workers, other female trade unionists identified the limitations of key male activists in their approach to the issue of women's job security, as in the area of wages and grading. Thus one respondent, employed at Spon Street at the time of the interview (the factory has since closed), had this to say about the way the unions failed to represent women:

"Well I first joined the T&GWU, but I found them to be "yellow bellied" when it came to women. Now when jobs are short in our plant, there are rumours that they may close the place, and they won't fight for our jobs, and it was later I left and joined the AUEW."

Kate: "Can you tell me how that happened?"

"The problem was that the T&G convenor just didn't believe that married women should work, and he still hasn't changed I'm sure, he was a 'die hard'. He believed that their places are in the home. And there was the time when the AUEW steward told us that jobs were going to be moved to Scotland, and we would be bound to suffer job loss if this was allowed to happen. Now the T&G convenor told the members to ignore the AUEW stewards, that they were making mountains out of mole hills. He was a bit... liar because the jobs did go to Scotland -that happened in exactly a year."

Kate: "Are you saying he wouldn't fight to protect women's jobs, or jobs in general?"

"Most certainly yes, they went, he was just not prepared to fight for women, he was deep in management's pockets. Anyway that was when I found out he wouldn't fight for women. And it was then that I found out he wouldn't support women, he believed they shouldn't be at work. So I took my union card and I shredded it right there in front of his nose. I said if you are not going to represent me then I am not going to support you, get it. ...Actually I made an attempt to punch him, smash him, but my friends said he was not worth me losing my job, and they held me down. They prevented me from hitting him. It was then that we joined the AUEW. He believed that the management have a right to manage."

Kate: "And what about your experience of the AUEW, do they believe that the management have a right to manage?"

"Well it seems that they are more or less the same, they seem to go by what the T&G says. They agree that the management have a right to manage, so what is the point of having a union. That is it, they are not the ones who went short, but you see there are a lot of women who have families to keep. They are on their own or whatever. And my argument is a single parent family is a family with the same needs as a two parent family, the money is needed just the same, and why should the likes of me who has worked all my life allow them to insist that I suffer because I am a woman."

Kate: "Are you now saying that neither union will fight for women?"

"Let me give you an example of what I mean. As a steward you have got to be on one side or the other. Now if you are on management's side they will find ways to keep you there, and if you are on the workers side they will try to get rid of you. I mean we had this hopeless steward, right up to his neck with management he was, we got rid of him, and elected a really good man from another section, but they wouldn't accept him and took it to arbitration, that is you see how it was. A man who did his job properly wasn't wanted."⁴⁰

This comment highlights two intersecting themes, firstly the question of the perceived union attitude to female membership, and secondly the nature of employer strategies which involved attempted manipulation of the union at shop floor level. In regard to the first theme, this account provides a vigorous statement of the views held by a fairly wide spectrum of female opinion, who still saw both unions as biased against women despite the active presence of female stewards. From this respondent's perspective the T&G denial that jobs were to be lost was linked to the fact that they were women's jobs, and as such were not worthy of defence. Furthermore there is a suggestion that the women workers involved had become pawns in inter-union rivalry, for in the end this woman concluded that there was no real difference between the unions; neither afforded much protection to female workers. Underlying this assessment is a lucid understanding of managerial strategies which seek to undermine union strength, either via the incorporation of

⁴⁰ Interview with M.F. (b.1944) (Worked at GIBC 1963-84)

malleable stewards or the removal of more challenging colleagues.⁴¹

Having discussed some aspects of the issues of pay, grading, redundancy and closure as they have been experienced by active union women at GBC, I now want to round off my discussion by considering how these women have raised, and sought collective representation on, topics which are more explicitly 'women's issues' - ranging from childcare to menstruation. One of my key informants gives a good indication of the ways in which such issues were raised and dealt with, and deserves to be quoted here at some length:

"Very little consideration was given to the question of us being women with needs, with families. I mean there were no facilities, no cloakroom, no showers, no lockers, I mean there was nowhere for you to hang your coat. If you were lucky you could find a peg somewhere at the end of the section, but most people hung their coats on the back of chairs. I had brought the issue up at various meetings and it was debated at length. The works manager argued, when I asked for lockers - 'Well you know these women, you will fill the lockers with spare shoes, empty pop bottles, tins, cans and make up - so its not feasible' - Well I then raised the question of women bringing valuables into work - you see women bring in money to pay bills, I mean you started work at 7.30 and finished at 4.30 or 5.30, well you could only pay those at dinner time."

Kate: "So what was the conclusion of that encounter?"

"I was told the women could give up their valuables to the foreman on each section. I said that it reminded me when I was at school and we had to give our pocket money to the teacher. I told him we were grown women and would refuse that offer. Well I barged in but failed".

Kate: "During your long stay at GBC, did you notice some kind of change or perhaps improvement?"

⁴¹ In this respect there are certain parallels with the management strategy documented in Nichols and Beynon, *Living With Capitalism*, p77

"Well I was at Spon St. That factory is one of the oldest and least modernised. But at the time it was built it was regarded as very modern. You see it was the only high rise building apart from another one at the other end of the city. But no improvements have been made. When I left there were less facilities. I mean in the 1950s we had two surgeries, one for women and one for men, now there is only one. And there again we used to be able to buy items like GBC irons, fridges and radios at reduced prices, then that all went".

Kate: "And what about issues like women's health and safety?"

"You are joking, women's health was treated as a joke. Even the question of hygiene. Well you see I had been approached by many of the women to see if we got a machine which would provide some sanitary facilities. I wanted the tampon machine fitted into the female toilet area. However I was told by a management committee that the majority of women were older women and they don't like tampons. I was told older women used traditional sanitary towels. Now you must remember this was a male enclave who was telling me this".

Kate: But surely your fellow male shop stewards supported you on this issue?"

"Absolutely no - at every shop stewards meeting the issue was on the agenda until the convenor Albert Beardmore turned around and said well lets first deal with the tampons. His opinion was, 'these things are so small I understand you can carry them around in your handbag'. But you see I couldn't see why we couldn't raise this point and why we couldn't make the working environment more pleasant."⁴²

This extract suggests several important features of the way in which workplace unionism was experienced by this woman activist, and probably others also. It provides a clear illustration of the way male trade unionists may allow their prejudices to influence their union politics in a way which was immediately problematic for the women concerned and can be argued be detrimental to the development of a more progressive consciousness and solidarity. In her study of trade union and women workers Charles (1986) looked at a number of different work places and

⁴² Interview with K.G. (b.1922) (Worked at GBC 1958-84)

found that the question of menstruation was not generally raised, whilst where women stewards had succeeded in getting it on the bargaining agenda this had little effect for a combination of reasons including lack of support from both management and trade unions. Thus the experience of women activists at the GEC corresponds with a wider pattern in this regard.

In some ways it was both ironic and contradictory that male trade unionists should react so vehemently in this situation given the high profile of other women centred-activities like the ritualized rites of passage, discussed in chapter five. In the context of shopfloor politics and culture certain sets of behaviour were sanctioned, while other activities were given a free reign. For instance, marriage together with pregnancy and thus fertility were clearly celebrated. The celebration of these rites of passage was looked on favourably but appeared circumscribed by male notions of ideal female behaviour. This contrasted sharply with the responses to demands for sanitary facilities: such demands appeared to be the unacceptable and somewhat obtrusive face of reproduction. This brought into the public forum a hitherto taboo issue, thus forced men to confront their prejudices. Furthermore it was a case of women defining their needs as women, and making demands in that context, whilst normally union issues were selected and raised according to male tastes.⁴³

At the same time this account shows that the women concerned clearly regarded the question of their well being and health as also a trade union issue. An older respondent explained the patterns of taboo and silent suffering against which such recent awareness and assertiveness developed:

"Well it was really hard, you see I began to menstruate during the first year I was there, and I kept fainting. Well the foreman said, she has no right to be in here if she has a weak heart (laughs). The funny thing was I was taken to the nurse each time and she didn't explain to the foreman. Well I wouldn't could I - it wasn't done. And of course then you had to stand all day. With your back and feet aching - it was awful. There were no 'facilities' for

⁴³ For a fuller discussion of the taboo surrounding this whole question of menstruation see Laws (1983).

women you see. None at all, it was so barbaric, and then you had to stand and suffer, and of course the nurse was of very little help."⁴⁴

Against such a background, the significance of the active articulation of requests for facilities to cope with menstruation can be more fully appreciated, as can the frustration arising from the blockage of the issue within the union committee structure.

Child care and the question of creche facilities were other issues which had received little attention in the context of workplace bargaining, but were ones the women argued should form a core feature of the bargaining agenda. This was forcefully voiced by one activist:

"And about the question of creches. They had one (GBC at Spon Street) during the war. That was when they made radar equipment on government contracts but they liked to keep it quiet. Now I often said to our union you will fight to get a man a space for his car in a car park, but why can't you fight to get a space for a woman to park her child. I mean there ought to be work nurseries now and they ought to have been there when I was a mother. But if we couldn't get one in the days of full employment what chance have you got now?"⁴⁵

As this implies, in the experience of the female stewards, they still had to succeed in making the question of child care an issue for union organization and bargaining. This situation was due in part to a lack of understanding and support from a male dominated trade union which was clearly at odds with 'women's issues', a point further elaborated by another respondent:

"And of course, the unions wouldn't fight for creches, no never. It's just issues which evolve around work, and I mean they would say, 'you will have to pay for them out of your wages.' That was the excuse. I mean only last week or so there was a young girl with children who was forced to leave. She had problems with the childminder. She was forced to pack up. And she was stranded, now what good was the union to her, in fact she was being prevented from working. Now if that was a man can you imagine the furor, and the noise,

⁴⁴ Interview with M.B. (b.1915) (Worked at GBC 1930-50)

⁴⁵ Interview with K.C. (b.1922) (Worked at GBC 1933-84)

but if it's women 'its how things are.' Anyway she asked to be put on part-time, and asked the foreman, all to no avail. He said there was no work. She was actually forced to leave because they refused to allow her to be transferred. Now they don't need to accommodate us anymore. There are plenty of women queuing up for work. So creches are a divine luxury⁴⁶

In these sorts of respects the comments of women activists on the progress of the union over the years suggest that the unions have shifted very little towards a policy which takes account of working mothers. In the days of full employment the question of public or company-based child care was not on the agenda, though the labour shortage experienced by the company might have given an incentive to the company had there been union backing. Instead the union appeared to have opted for the company strategy of the part-time shift. I would argue that this policy brought as many disadvantages as benefits to women. It ensured that they were denied any form of job security, and it guaranteed low pay, not least because the unions failed to demand parity with full-time women. Since the more recent changes in labour market conditions and the increase in unemployment the unions now argue that demands for child care are unrealistic.

In many ways then, although these women activists were keen to demonstrate that collective organization had become a reality in the workplace relations of several of the GEC plants, they were also keen to convey the limitations arising from entrenched attitudes within the union to women's issues:

"Well a lot of time was spent on pay, manning, standards of safety, health care, surgery provisions, canteens, anything like that. Now the male stewards had their favourite agenda and things like womens' health and especially nurseries wasn't one of them. You had to fight tooth and nail to get certain things discussed. And it is true that a great deal of time was spent on those things, and you had to get women thinking in that way. You see if we had to get women to a meeting, and take fifteen minutes out of work time, not only the

⁴⁶ Interview with L. W. (b. 1927) (Worked at GEC 1952-84)

management but the people would think fifteen minutes lost. Now the women themselves would prefer to 'alog' away day after day, week after week than fight for their rights. Women are the biggest fools, their mentality is on a whole half hour gone and what have we got, even if that was about something that would affect them."⁴⁷

What this comment brings out is the mutually reinforcing interplay between the failure of the women to pursue key 'women's issues' and the pragmatic passivity of the bulk of women workers -both of which had to be challenged by the female activists who have been my key informants in this chapter. The limited success of their efforts in the face of the prejudices and inertia of male union activists and the official union meant that the union agenda remained male-dominated despite a predominantly female membership, and this in turn did little to undermine the scepticism of that membership. In this context part-time working involved further obstacles to effective organization, while most women were so tied into and bound by the unit system, that many begrudged the time spent at union meetings.

In summary then, while it is not possible to generalise from the experiences of what is a distinctive group of women activists, most of whom worked full-time and many of whom were single parents, nevertheless their accounts register some problematical features of union organization for all the women at GEC. Indeed the activists accounts may partly explain the passivity of the bulk of the female union members, for the character of organization, whilst encouraging membership, appeared to discourage active participation, both through a failure to focus on issues specific to women workers, and by appearing not to give women equal treatment to male workers. These features are reflected in the activists demands for a change in the union's approach to bargaining issues affecting women: they have called for the recognition of a woman's right to a wage sufficient to sustain a family; they have challenged that the women workers in fact received equal pay;⁴⁸ they are critical of both unions failure to protect women's jobs's: and they call for a

⁴⁷ Interview with K.G. (b.1922) (Worked at GEC 1958-64)

⁴⁸ This is in contrast to Seall's study where she points out that "Both employers and many women believe that equal pay has been implemented and that no further action is needed." *Waged Work, A Reader* (1986) pp24 they can.

more progressive approach to issues like women's health and hygiene. Whilst this account should not be taken as a general comment on such issues and does not exhaust the complexity of such issues, nevertheless it provides an introductory insight into what are sensitive, challenging problems for unions and for the collective organization of women.

CHAPTER NINE

Conclusions.

In writing this thesis I have first of all attempted to portray the work experiences of a group of working class women, and have tried to give them a voice. Such women represent a larger number of long silent sisters whose participation, efforts, expertise, experience, strength and diligence have been involved in the creation of wealth in the post-war economy. Thus I have studied the experience of a grouping of women workers in the electrical engineering industry, who were clearly working class women involved in manual wage labour but whose home and waged work lives were also sharply circumscribed by gender relations. These features define a shared set of constraints and pressures which were central to the experience of all these women, though I have also been concerned to explore significant sources of differentiation in that experience, particularly in terms of distinctive generational, life cycle and familial situations. One implication of this attention to differences is that any appreciation of the significance of actual and potential solidarities among these women in the face of both class and gender inequalities must also recognize the subtle changes and variations in their specific experiences and consciousness of such relationships. Throughout the thesis I have been concerned to document and explain the ways in which these women experienced their subordinate position in both class and gender relations, and particularly the interlinking features of class and gender subordination in the workplace, whilst continuing to attend to sources of variation, change and challenge in these relations.

In chapter two I have attempted to convey some sense of the character of the Coventry labour market, suggesting that its growth and development, despite considerable change and restructuring, also involved a deeply entrenched sexual division of labour, which meant that women's place in the labour market was very much circumscribed. It was in relation to this deeply sexually circumscribed structure that the GBC developed its employment policies.

In chapter three I have outlined the establishment, growth and character of the GEC. I have explored the notion of a 'women's factory' and the company's predilection for female labour. In doing this I have suggested that women enter the workplace wearing a specific label which defined them as different placing primary emphasis on them as 'women workers'.

In chapter four I have looked at the women's preference for the GEC, their experiences of part-time work and the realities of low pay. This involved a critical assessment of the notion of 'pin money'. In examining these issues I have looked at the experiences of two groups of women who represent two different generations and have found that the notion 'woman worker' has had as much salience for the younger group as it had for the older women, some of whom had daughters at the GEC. I have attempted to trace the pattern of experience of the women workers at GEC linking up their workplace position with their position in the family, and the way in which this was ideologically construed by the employer in terms of the actual or potential dependency of all women workers on the male wage. Drawing on the different circumstances of women in relation to the male wage, for instance partnered women versus lone women, I have shown the inadequacy of a wage strategy which assumed the dependency of women. For instance lone women of the older cohort described their struggles both as waged workers unable to earn the equivalent to an independent wage, and as mothers and domestic workers in the home, and the ways in which this sapped their strength and blighted their initiative in the workplace and in a trade union organisation which refused to come to terms with this reality.

However lone women were not the only ones to experience the oppression associated with being defined as dependent on the male wage. Partnered women suffered too from this as for many partnered women the male wage labour market meant insecurity and uncertainty, strife and effort. Being locked into a wage structure which never allowed women to become workers in their own right, emphasised their assumed dependence and forced such partnered women to rely on the male wage, whilst subjecting the lone women to a situation of abject poverty.

Explanations for this lay partly in the deeply sexually entrenched character of the local labour market, which circumscribed the direction of employment of the women during the post-

war period. The GEC, which had been established in the 1920s, had grown by the post-war period into a multi-plant firm sporting the reputation of being a "women's" employer, and a low paying employer. The respondents all agreed that there were very strong pressures in the process of job seeking guiding them to the GEC. Drawing on the women's experience and interpretation of their wage I have attempted to show the disparity between the employer's assumption that women did not work through need, but rather for some other more ephemeral, less tangible reasons, and the women's views, which strongly challenged the notion of 'pin money'. Whilst it was important to focus on the pattern of wages as a constituent in the marginalisation of women as workers, it was equally important to keep in mind the specific, socially and historically located, conceptions of need which these women held. In particular my interviewees' interpretations of need reflected consumption patterns specific to particular generations, though participation in such patterns of consumption was only possible for those partnered women whose spouses were employed full-time. Furthermore, I want to suggest that the development of part-time work in the post-war period challenged women's establishment as 'workers' and helped to structure them into a secondary labour market, which in a wider context constituted them as marginal workers and into a subordinate position in the class structure.

Another important aspect of marginalisation of women at the GEC was the way in which women's labour, competences, expertise and jobs was portrayed by the company. These themes I have developed in chapters five and six.

In chapter five I have explored the relationships between femininity and workplace cultures, both in terms of management stereotypes and the activities of the women themselves. I have wanted to argue a number of inter-related points. Firstly, drawing on documentary sources and using interviews with management, I have suggested that the company deployed and reinforced quite stereotyped views of female workers and their competences. I have tried to show that despite their long workplace experience women were still constituted and reconstituted as 'women workers' as opposed to being workers, whilst the company also differentiated between part-time and full-time women workers.

Although the women differed in terms of their levels and forms of participation in waged work, they themselves re-appropriated and modified the themes of domesticity and femininity in a way which brought them together as 'working class women'. Solidarity was expressed in many ways, but in the context of reconstituting a female workplace culture, key features were the 'Baby Table' (which helped the women to cope with pressures in their lives), the 'Hen Parties' (which marked a recognition of mature womanhood) and the 'Leaving Parties' which commenced in the workplace in 'work time' -all of which were both collusive and oppositional in relation to gender stereotypes and management control. Whilst I have argued that such activities constituted forms of resistance to the constraints of the wage relationship, the notion of female identity which they fostered left the stereotypical and distinctive characterisation of women workers by management virtually unchallenged.

The impact of such stereotypes was clearly evident in my discussion of management's recruitment strategies, but became a focus of my account of management definitions of women's labour, competences and expertise as an extension of domesticity. In this context I have explained some aspects of the simultaneous endorsement and partial challenge to these stereotypes involved in the women workers' own perspectives. My material suggests that, the women themselves disputed some aspects and implications of the dominant (and management) stereotypes of women's work, and such challenges involved some affirmation of a distinctive female shop floor appreciation of their labours. Nevertheless it also suggests that most such challenges operated within the major parameters of the dominant notions of femininity, domesticity and women's work, in such a way that the dominant stereotypes and modes of management conduct remained intact. Furthermore, whilst the views of the women introduced subversive or potentially challenging emphases which highlighted certain contradictions in management perspectives and practices, management was sufficiently flexible to absorb and defuse such features without any substantial alteration of their overall stereotypes.

In chapter six I looked more closely at some aspects of management policy and practice and also attempted to draw out some contradictions in management strategies, pointing to their stress on training programmes, on job experience and the re-employment of experienced workers whilst

they continued to insist on domestic stereotypes of female competence. This led me to examine the question of skill and the way this notion might be relevant to the women I interviewed.

I pursued this issue by recording both management stereotypes of women's skills and dexterities and the views of the women themselves as revealed during my interviews. Two major themes emerge from this discussion. Firstly, that a variety of distinctive conceptions of task complexity and expertise co-exist alongside a pay and grading structure which defines the work of these women as at best semi-skilled, and rewards it as unskilled. Secondly, and beyond this I show that the practical realities of the work involved considerable training and acquired expertise, features which are at odds with the dominant management stereotype of simple tasks and 'natural' dexterity. Thus I suggest that, though these women do not possess a set of widely recognized or accredited skills, they possess considerable experience and expertise both in dealing with a variety of work contingencies and in balancing work quality and pace. However the significance of these features is suppressed or downgraded in a grading structure which deploys but also belittles expertise (as in such categories as key girl) and treats training as a process of exposing and sorting natural competences.

In chapter seven I looked more closely at power relations within the workplace and the shifting patterns of management control which involved both management, class and gender dimensions. In this context I have examined instances of technical, organizational and gender change in the way work was organized, and the women's experiences of such change particularly in terms of patterns of control. Women were subject to changing work patterns caused by fragmentation, which had implications for the restructuring of the sexual division of labour within the workplace, as well as presenting women with new forms of work pressure and pacing.

My interview material shows that such shifting forms of control and work pressure, associated with paternalistic supervision, the application and modification of bonus systems, and work fragmentation and line pacing, were by no means passively accepted by the women. Rather there is clear evidence of a variety of forms of subterfuge and challenge, ranging from the subversion of timing and pacing techniques to strikes and sit-ins in defence of relatively good grading or

bonus arrangements. Such responses share many features with male workers, but also involve distinctive solidarities against male and managerial conceptions of the role of women workers, and thus represent the limited but real contestation of both class and gender subordination.

I have suggested that the labour process at the GBC involved a combination of elements which approximated to a system of simple control (Edwards 1979) but changed in form from detailed personal control exercised through the foreman to more impersonal pressures mediated through the changing technologies of the line, though these changes involved persistently gendered features of control and resistance. This brings me directly to the question of the role of unions in the lives of these women.

In a final chapter I have examined women's experiences of trade union organisation at GBC. Drawing on some documentary material and the women's accounts I have attempted to convey some sense of the evolution and character of the union organisation within the company. Despite the company's ambivalent and sometimes hostile attitude to the active participation of women in collective organization, the union grew from a patchy beginning in the 1930s to widespread organization in the 1960s and 1970s. However, whilst the union succeeded in organizing a forum for collective bargaining within the company, matters reaching the agenda tended to fall within the conventional framework and included issues such as pay and manning, which the activists argue fell short of dealing with other issues central to the lives of working women, like child-care and health and hygiene.

The activists accounts suggests that the union's success limited as it was due to their efforts, and many of them were influenced by family background -in two distinct ways. I have suggested that this pattern of union organization at the GBC was sustained by the interplay of the following features: a job structure which involved substantial part-time work, which made union organization on some shifts particularly difficult; the prejudices and inertia of both male activists and the official trade union; and the pragmatism and passivity of the female membership. In this context the female activists I interviewed, whose activism was often influenced by strong family commitments to the labour movement or by their experience of their own domestic struggles, contributed

a vitality to shop-floor unionism but also developed a sharp critique of the limitations within which the union tended to operate.

I hope that my analysis of the experience of the women who worked at GBC has done justice to the perspectives and the resilience of these women, and has revealed the critical features of their consciousness and activity as well as the constraints within which they have worked through the decades.

Methodology.

Introduction

This section provides an insight into the methodologies used and some of the problems I encountered. It consists of three parts, a brief account of the selection of management informants, a more elaborate account of the interviews with the women and a discussion of the use of documentary material.

The first part should consist of a discussion of the selection of management informants. Although the purpose of the writing the thesis was to highlight women's account of their work experiences I found it necessary to interview a number of management personnel in order to strengthen the arguments provided particularly by the *Loudepeaker*. In doing this I was able to provide a fuller and more adequate account of some of the issues raised in the data relating to the company, and I was able to raise issues not addressed in this material. Criterion for the selection of management informants rested on representation. In this sense I was concerned that the selected sample should cover the spread of plants constituting the company over time. Some of the initial contacts with management were made through some of the women informants. A second form of contact was through a response to my letters published in local newspapers seeking women informants - when some managers replied offering help. Such initial contacts had a spinoff effect leading me to more interviews.

This section centres on the interviews with the women informants and outlines some of the problems I encountered during the research process. One of its central research aims from a methodological viewpoint is to allow women to speak for themselves, to express the meaning of their lived experiences. It is a case study of women's interpretations of a "women's factory", the GBC in Coventry. The GBC was the 'obvious choice' for research on women's manual work in Coventry. In my experience of living within the local community, when the issue of women and work was raised people inevitably and without prompting identified the GBC as the "women's factory". It was then the single largest employer of women manual workers in what was a car town based on a long history of engineering skills. It comprised of six to eight separate plants all located within the city, each in manufacturing processes. It was fairly common for my

respondents to have worked in several of these plants. The plants varied in size and to some extent in the products they produced. For instance, the Stoke plant, which was the oldest and one of the larger plants, manufactured telecommunication equipment and also housed the research and development unit. During the post-war period the Spon Street plant made domestic appliances, while according to my oral history evidence Brandon Road plant was small and used as an overspill for the larger Stoke plant. The GBC is now a large multi-national with a number of overseas operations, but my study is concerned with these Coventry plants. It also concentrates on the period 1945-1965, a time period chosen because it witnessed the employment of married women on a scale hitherto unparalleled. This was the period when the idea of married women playing a role in employment became to some extent acceptable. (Riley 1983.) It was also a period of relative expansion and I wanted to examine the way in which women were slotted into the job market, and to see whether women's social status had any significant affect on labour market opportunities.

The major part of the oral history sample consisted of forty-two women who had worked at the GBC. These respondents were recruited through a process of 'snow-ball sampling' set in motion by use of key informants and a letter to the press, and each informant was interviewed in some depth using semi-structured interview and tape-recording of the resultant conversation. I will now discuss aspects of this research process in more detail in the following order, selection, access, interviewing, sample variables, oral history research and other research resources.

Sample Selection and Access.

Among these women with whom I made contact, selection for interview was based on three criteria. Firstly, that each potential informant should have spent at least one year in the employment of the GBC at one or more of their plants in the city. Secondly, that the work they were engaged upon should be a task categorised as manual work, and therefore be confined to some activity on the shop floor. First line supervision was accepted within this criterion. Thirdly, that work experience must have included some time between 1945-1965.

An important feature of my scattered sample was that, because of the longevity of service of many of my informants, work experience across the whole period was quite adequately covered. Furthermore, since many of the women had experience across various plants and different tasks I was able to build a general picture of the pattern of workplace relationships, portray an account of those issues which were of most importance to the women with some confidence.

In addition to the interviews with women workers, I interviewed a number of past and present management personnel during the early part of 1969. They were personnel managers from different plants, two works managers (one of whom was involved in the recruitment of 'girl labour' in the inter and post-war period), and male supervisors. In addition I also interviewed the current personnel and works managers, and works superintendent and visited the main works.

Access was the key underlying issue defining the successful completion of data collection. In the context of an oral history approach it can best be described as a series of continued negotiations. This is very much linked to the methods by which respondents were first identified and contacted, and this process was not without complications. For example, in the case of some of the older age workers, husbands acted as the gatekeepers to the research interview. Initially, a letter outlining a brief resume of the research proposal and an invitation requesting interested women to participate was published on two separate occasions in the local newspapers. I found that this started the process of establishing a snow-ball sample, but did not serve to produce sufficient informants. Given my resources, I had to depend largely on people to contact me by letter, whereas being able to give a telephone number may have encouraged a better response.

Furthermore, in two instances initial letters came from husbands of wives who had appropriate work experience, however, such women could not be persuaded to participate. This process resulted in a limited number of very important informants. They were often long serving employees with other workplace experience, particularly from the war. I found these women were very keen to recall their war-time work experience, how they were called on to do 'men's jobs' and the implications of that. This was useful not only to begin talking but also to use this material in a comparative context. As this implies, this initial group of informants were primarily older women.

A second and more fruitful approach to the older women was through key community figures representative of that age group. Visits to community level activities were arranged for me, for instance, evenings at the Womens' Institute and afternoons at local community centres. These visits opened the doors to many contacts. It was through these two methods that initial contacts were made with the older women, and following on from this, through these informants, this eventually led to many meetings with the younger cohort of women also.

Thus access to the younger women was achieved in two ways, firstly through kin, and secondly through personal recommendation and reference. In the first case the members of the older group would often suggest I contact daughters who had experience at the GBC. Friends were also introduced to me in this way. Similar patterns can be observed for the younger women. Sisters or friends were contacted, whereupon I was introduced.

A distinction must be made in the rates of response. More older women were interviewed. This is explained partly by the open-ended return of my initial request where age is not stipulated, and there are several likely reasons why older women were more likely to respond. Older women were more available and had more time and inclination to talk about themselves. Secondly, most of them were no longer employed at the GBC, while most of the younger ones were still there, and may therefore have felt less free to talk.

Forty-two women were successfully interviewed. To arrive at the actual interview setting involved a number of stages. Having made the initial contact, the next step was to pay an

informal visit to the interviewee's house. The purpose of this was to explain my objectives and to clarify to the potential informants what would be required of them. I explained that I would ask a number of questions around a series of themes relating to their life experiences of work and home. I pointed out at this stage that I planned to record the interviews and later transcribe them. It would in turn comprise information for my PhD thesis. The use of a taped conversation is often a moot point and is mentioned by Burgess (1984), and Thompson (1978), as a stage in research which requires sensitive negotiation. Questions of confidentiality and trust need to be highlighted at this point. All but one of the forty-three women I made the first visit to agreed to be interviewed in the manner described with the exception of one woman. (see below)

The whole image of the researcher as perceived by the researched greatly influences the course and development of the research process. Class, race, ethnicity, gender and age are outlined by (Burgess 1984) as factors which either impede or advance the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In my own case being a woman proved to be the one outstanding enabling factor. I gained the distinct impression that women felt more confident being interviewed by a woman. Some researchers advise (Burgess 1984) that there should be such a matching between the researcher and the informants, I think this can be very important, because it helps to transcend remaining differences. There were a number of differences between myself and my informants in terms of class, sometimes ethnicity and in the case of the older cohorts age. However, I did not necessarily find the age difference a problem. Many of the women were much older than me, and I would argue that this gave them a real or perceived vantage point over me. Many expressed the view that they had seen more 'of real life'. This intimated to me both class and age distinctions. Ideally I wanted to develop a relationship where the respondents could feel they held equal footing with me. The fact that a majority of the women were older, had working experience in 'proper working class jobs' and retold their experiences in the security of their own homes brought about some balance in the research relationship.

In regard to ethnicity, those older women who recognized that I came from Eire responded in a dual fashion. On the one hand, they referred to the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain in a way that might be expected, in that Ireland and the Irish were viewed in a fairly

negative way, but on the other hand they made an exception for me, for I was a university graduate and therefore dissimilar to the stereotypical images. None of the younger women commented at all on such issues.

I attempted to discuss the research themes as topics which held mutual interest for us both, the researcher and the researched. I explained I wanted to be called by my first name, and any prestige that may have been attached to my position as a postgraduate student was downplayed. Also being a woman certainly helped to transcend many distinctions. In some cases the older working class women very much dwelled in the 'great past'. Many still cherished a culture that elevated a view of working class people as the survivors of an austere historical period, referring to childhood experiences in the 1920s and the inter-war and second world war periods. Some members of the older cohort drew analogies between the 1930s and the 1980s arguing that the young people of today are in a similar position. This type of imagery and consciousness is often perceived by male labour historians as exclusively a male interpretation of social reality, but my experience was that women too share in this imagery. In this situation being younger and perceived as middle class helped. Women wanted to tell their story, open up their hearts in some cases.

By contrast assumptions drawn from the class background of the researcher can equally impede research. In my own case doubts were raised about the authenticity of my research role. The most commonly articulated doubt was that I may have been a social security snooper, an official from the Inland Revenue or an investigator from the Home Office. In all of the latter instances my class background intimated to my respondents the possibility that I might be in some capacity an agent of the state who was perceived as threatening or oppressive. I am happy to say that I successfully allayed those fears and doubts with only one exception, but this exception deserves a brief comment for it underlines the fears which might discourage participation in this sort of research.

In this case I noticed on arrival that the respondent seemed reluctant to commence the prearranged interview in the manner agreed. For instance, the very innocently put question

"where were you born" threw the respondent into a frenzy of panic. The response was "Why do you want to know if we are supposed to talk about work". Despite its fairly innocuous intention the question was interpreted by my respondent as an infringement upon her liberty, her status as a citizen and position as a worker in this country. This comment represents her sharp reproach:

"Afterall I'm black, I work in a factory, my job might go any day and the Home Office might send me back. They don't want us here now with all the unemployment and so they say we don't belong. If we talk you will learn about me, you are a white woman at university, and I don't know that you may not be. I'm also poor and would never go to a university."¹

The was a migrant woman and her reaction was clearly a response to the underlying racism of British society institutionalised in legislation relating to crucial issues affecting her like race, nationality and position as a migrant. She explained that the government proposals seriously threatened her. Moreover, her position at GEC was also uncertain as the threat of redundancy was then a current topic. In view of her fears and uncertainties I decided that it was preferable if I did not pursue with the interview. I felt I was unable to disarm her of her fears and that for her to undergo the interview would further burden her with worry. This was the one occasion where trust could not be gained, and underlined the salience of race and class differences.

¹ Interview with Aileen

The Interview

Substantively the interview schedule was comprised of ten themes, and each theme was covered by approximately eight to ten questions. The first theme was designed to establish an understanding of the informants background. An outline of the life work history of the respondent contributed the second theme. This provided the overall background against which issues affecting the respondent's work position at the OBC were set. Other themes included recruitment to the OBC, skill, trade unionism and ideas and practices related to child care and the division of labour within the household. Each informant was asked the same set of questions. Importantly the format of the questions was open-ended and designed to encourage richness and diversity of response. This was designed to allow for the subjective interpretation and understandings of informants to emerge, to encourage women to speak for themselves in respect of each particular issue.

The collection and analysis of research data about attitudes and experiences always raises questions about the imposition of the researchers values on the respondents. However, I would argue that although the questions and schedules were predefined, autonomy and flexibility can be negotiated to favour the respondent, provided the researcher is sensitive. For instance, it can be suggested to the informant that it is possible to reorganise the sequence in which the topics will be discussed. While many of the women I interviewed felt comfortable with the interview layout, I discovered that during the interview process they imposed their own order. Furthermore, individual interviewees displayed preoccupations with some matter than other topics on the schedule. Thus I found women talked about particular issues at length while only speaking briefly on others. In part this reflected their different concerns for participating in the research in the first place.

To some extent the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is a reciprocal process. For instance, some women will want to discuss their experience of discrimination in the workplace and will debate at length the problems incurred because of a poor collective bargaining system, or the issue of low wages, or poor health and safety regulations. They may have a

political concern and articulate a form of consciousness which seeks to highlight the class-rooted suffering of women workers. On the other hand, some women want to emphasize specific aspects of their lives. In one case, an initial question about a respondent's life work history brought a response which continued unrelenting for three hours. In this case I did not interrupt or disturb the flow of information, as she gave an account of her successful upward mobility from being a factory worker and dress maker to a position as a teacher in the 1930s, and she also wanted to talk about her experiences as a teacher. Similarly in the case of two Irish migrant women who later became nursing sisters they wanted to talk about their experiences as migrants. In such cases it was sometimes less easy to acquire the remainder of the information required by the schedule, for while in all cases I completed the interview, I found that some such respondents did not show equal enthusiasm for the remaining themes. However, other interviews compensated for the discrepancy, for not all women articulated the same interests and concerns. Some wanted to discuss workplace culture, and such things as methods of skiving, while many wanted to draw attention to their competence and the manner in which it went unrewarded in poor pay. Unlike the respondent mentioned earlier very few women ever expected to enter middle class jobs or education. Many had shown pride in their skills and length of service to the company and wanted to talk more about those issues most closely related to the workplace. At the same time all of the women wanted to convey a dual image of their lives and work, often involving a sense of alienation and exploitation, but also the way this was managed and endured: in this sense many of these women felt proud of their class position, and exhibited a distinctive form of consciousness of that problem. Thus it was not the case that some of the respondents did not want to answer all the questions, but more the case that some people like to elaborate on favourite themes.

Thus, I believe that my use of open ended questions was appropriate and fruitful since it encouraged depth and diversity in responses and information, and it allowed the interviewees to introduce issues which they saw as significant. For instance, on asking an initial question about work conditions in the 1930s, one of my respondents gave a detailed account of how problematic menstruation was for women at that time within the workplace. The same topic was again raised during the course of interviewing a member of the younger age cohort who was a shop steward

during the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is an example where any preorganised thus structured schedule has sufficient flexibility to allow the respondents to introduce slightly diverging topics which they see as important, and there were several other instances of this pattern.

Paradoxically, the questions relating to the division of labour in the household and child care often gained what I felt to be only a reluctant response. All women undertook to answer the questions, but I distinctly felt they were often merely answering the questions. This pattern was observed for almost all the interviews with only few exceptions where women were one parent families and had higher than average education. Two mundane explanations can be offered for this pattern. Firstly, it was often the case that debates on some issues involved some overlapping. For instance, a discussion about working on a part-time shift could also elucidate details of child care organization. A second explanation is that at the end of a fairly lengthy interview session people were tired. However, I did not consider that a return visit to cover the theme paid off any better suggesting more was involved. Another and more remote explanation might have been linked to the way I initially presented the research schedule, while I explained to women that it was about their workplace experiences, thus their *worker* insights as opposed to their *'nonwork'* lives. Certainly as a result some women expressed surprise at the scope of the interview questions. However the pattern of women's responses also suggested that more was at stake here, as child care among working women was generally seen as a particularly sensitive issue. This probably relates to the set of ideas and practices on motherhood popular in the post war period. Working mothers feel guilty about working for wages, though not all women share the same level of such guilt. A few argued that the financial income improved the quality of life, and this enhanced their role as mothers, but most of the younger women and some of the older women who were mothering in the 1950s showed particular concern about "spending enough time with the children."² Thus this pattern of responses posed dilemmas for the researcher: It is to press ahead, asking questions from different angles around the topic, to draw out the information.

² There are similarities with Stroom's study (1983) who argues that Asian and white women in contrast to West Indian women consider that it is important for children under five to be cared by their biological mothers and are therefore likely not to work, or to work less.

However, a great deal of sensitivity and skill is required in this case, because the researcher may have touched on a raw nerve, and to exert too much pressure may in fact damage the relationship, and in my case access to further interviews.

I did all the interviews myself. Each respondent was interviewed separately in her own home usually alone. Although this was soon an established pattern, there were some variations to this, which posed problems in a few cases. Thus in one case the respondent had invited along her sister-in-law. On arrival the atmosphere seemed very cordial and there was some informal conversation, but in fact the presence of a third person was quite disruptive. The unrecruited informant who had no paid work experience very much objected to "young feminist women gadding off to University busying themselves with talking about women". This experience demonstrates that it often requires ingenuity to acquire information, for the unrecruited informant offered to answer most of the questions asked. I attempted to overcome this by identifying the respondents when transcribing the tape, but nevertheless I felt that the interview had been greatly interfered with, in that my respondent's real opinions perhaps may well have been suppressed. On two other occasions this disruption was less of a problem. In some cases friends and relatives "dropped in" and, although I temporarily stopped the interview began to offer information about aspects of work and life in Coventry. This was undoubtedly well meaning and indeed provided me with some insights into the life of car workers in the city, the consequences of the decline of the local manufacturing base and the subsequent restructuring of the local economy and labour market. However, this disrupted the flow of the questions.

The length of the interviews varied, but most lasted several hours. Some very good data was obtained from fairly short interviews as some people gave concise answers, but the longer interviews proved very worthwhile. Usually they were undertaken over several sessions, and in such cases women who I came to regard as key informants articulated strongly held opinions on all of the themes concerned. While I did not set out to find such key informant two or three women had a wealth of knowledge about particular periods and specific issues. They were enthusiastic to be interviewed and I found that I sometimes spent two days interviewing and ascertaining their views. Although each theme brought out a depth and of diversity of meaning,

there was often an underlying consensus among these informants. These women tended to be shop stewards and Labour party members and saw themselves as the voice of their sisters. Such women uniformly described the GBC as an understanding, paternal employer, a women's employer, but this common theme ran alongside a clear recognition that the work was low paid and that women were not given any recognition of their service or skills. In both of these respect such women appeared to voice more clearly sentiments which were widely shared.

Sample Variables

For the purpose of analysis my forty-two respondents are placed in various taxonomies. The women are divided according to different generational cohorts, and different lengths and types of work experience. Age, country of origin, and class formed important distinctions, which proved pertinent for various aspects of my analysis. In particular I divided my informants into two generational cohorts, those born before and during 1930, and those born after that date. Those born in or before 1930 would have entered the labour market before or during the war years. Those born after 1930 would not have entered the labour market until sometime in the post war period. I visualize the war as a watershed in social and economic change. I anticipated that this broad spread sample would provide information by which I might be able to build a picture of change and also identify continuities and patterns of consciousness. What was different for the two cohorts of women was they lived out particular life experiences at different historical moments, while what is a shared experience for both groups of respondents is their class and gender positions as workers and as domestic workers in the household. For example in discussing control I found that age was a key distinguishing factor in the way my respondents perceived supervision and job mobility, with them in the same cohort having similar responses, while on the questions of skill and trade unionism I found the whole sample shared a broad consensus. I have attempted to explore such similarities and differences as a basis for understanding workplace relations at GBC.

In the fourth chapter dealing with recruitment, I also distinguish non-migrant and migrant women. By migrant I refer to women who migrated to Coventry from other areas -this includes other regions within the Britain as well as from Eire, and also includes one Afro Caribbean

woman, one African woman, and a woman from the Philippines. Out of forty-two women thirteen came from outside the local area. This is the only section where the migrant non-migrant distinction was important, and though I had not intended to make this demarcation I found that it emerged from the oral history data itself. Of course migrant women are not a homogeneous group. Nevertheless the older migrant women with dependent children in contrast to the local women (those with families in Coventry) I interviewed faced particular sets of difficulties in attempting to organise paid and unpaid work.

Thus what I sought and obtained from the sample was a group which could tell me about their experience of work in the period 1945-65, and whose experience could be analysed along the lines indicated above. In the tables below I provide some additional information about the specific composition of the sample.

TABLE 1

Generation Category

Women born before and including 1930	=	27
Women born after and including 1931	=	15
		42

Average years with Company

Year of entry to OBC	No. of Entrants	No. of Re-entrants	Under 10 yrs	10-20 yrs	21-30 yrs	30+ yrs	Average Age Entrants*	Oldest/ Youngest
30-35	7	2	1	2	2	2	17.9	22-13
36-40	3	0	0	1	1	1	21.0	28-14
41-45	4	2	2	0	1	1	23.5	28-16
46-50	4	1	0	17	1	1	28.7	34-25
51-55	4	6	0	1	2	1	29.2	44-18
56-60	8	2	4	3	1	0	27.0	44-18
60-65	7	3	4	2	1	0	26.8	53-14

This excludes re-entrants * No adjustment made for re-entrants

Oral History Research and Other Resources

Alongside my interviews I also collected evidence from several documentary sources. The most important of these were: (1) the recorded minutes of fortnightly works conference meetings and trade union meetings. This included the collection of minutes held in the AEUW archive, as well as the the Engineering Employers Association archive, and various minutes relating to local and regional employers and trade union meetings in the Modern Records Archive, and (2) copies of *The Loudspeaker*, the company magazines, (3) newspaper reports, all of which are part of the Local History archive, though another (4) interesting documentary resource was a set of photographs of people at work in the GBC in the 1920s which clearly revealed the predominance of women workers in many cases.

The works meeting and union minutes were valuable in providing a basic indication of issues which were overtly in dispute within the workplace at specific moments in the history of the GBC, but they also had major limitations as sources. Firstly, they were available for certain time periods and secondly this provided only abbreviated reports - a common complaint about this sort of documentation is that it tells a lot about the conclusion of a dispute but says little about the nature of negotiation. Thus these records provide a partial picture both of these ways.

Furthermore, another major inadequacy was that it was written from a male perspective - in the instances women where did appear they were presented as a 'problem.'

Analogous problems were presented by the company magazines, *The Loudspeaker*, for though they presented an embodiment of the company as a community they also had a very clear managerial authorial voice. Thus, while they provide valuable evidence about managerial conceptions of women's work at the GBC, they cannot readily serve as evidence about women's own experience of that work. Even then such sources were unable to address particular issues.

I made several less than fruitful attempts to obtain more coherent data than that provided in the thesis on pay levels for the women concerned, relating to different plants, different jobs, and comparisons with male work over time. Similarly I attempted to obtain data on employment numbers, as well as a breakdown of figures identifying male and female workers across

occupations and plants over time. At the outset of my research, I approached the company requesting this information. Whilst the company were able to provide information of a more general nature, they were unable to provide specific information on wages and employees number -explaining they they did not keep records for the period I was examining. Later in 1989 having gained access to the company a second attempt to secure this information proved no more successful. In attempts to obtain information relating to these issues I made a search of the primary documentary material such as trade union minutes for both the TG&WU, AUEW and EEF records. Whilst there was some information on these issues, it was generally of such poor and fragmentary character that it did not merit use. In ^{these} circumstances I was forced to draw on any available material, and therefore has little option but to rely on the interview data.

Thus the limited documentary material on which I draw underlines the importance of interview and 'oral history' evidence about how women workers perceived their situation. As I have already made clear the bulk of my information has been obtained by interviews within this oral history tradition. However this tradition has come under criticism from mainstream history: it is argued it is an inferior approach and lacks scientificity, is liable to misrepresentation in that memory is not infallible; and lacks authenticity and the credibility of the written word.

However, such claimers are very one-sided. Written records are themselves problematical sources of evidence for they may conceal as much as they reveal. Not only does interpretation of such documentary sources depend upon knowledge or assumptions about the social context in which they were produced, but the authors of these sources have written with specific objectives and audiences in mind. Furthermore, some sorts of people -employers, the middle-class, men -are far more likely to have been the authors of such documents, and thus their preoccupations and prejudices are likely to be reflected in written records. I would suggest that such limitations were evident in the documentary sources available to me: the recorded minutes unproblematically portray women as unskilled labour, while trade union minutes project women as a 'problem', but going back to the women unfolds an entirely different picture on both counts.

Thus against this background oral history represents a major way of recovering the voice of those with little access to or control over written records - such as the working women at GBC. This appraisal has its own strengths, as Paul Thompson emphasises:

"The recording is far more reliable and accurate account of a meeting than a purely written record. All the exact words are used as they are when they are spoken; and added to them are social clues, the nuances of uncertainty, humour or pretence as well as the texture of dialect"³

It is as well to acknowledge the imperfections associated with this approach. It is retrospective, and is subject to the vagueness of perception and memory. The selectiveness of memory was evident in the course of my interviewing, in a common emphasis on more pleasant aspects of events and the discarding of more unpleasant and perhaps equally relevant features. The reliability of reminiscences must thus be carefully assessed. In the view of Portelli, oral recollections are likely to interpret events to:

"Tell us less about events than the meaning of events, ... they tell us not what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did"⁴

A similar opinion and interpretation is offered by Thompson who argues:

"People interpret their experiences within the culture which they provide. Consequently, stories which are not literally true may be socially important because other people believe them. Other stories may be of value for their incidental details, or for their symbolic meaning, rather than for the narrative itself"⁵

The meaning that people intend to give to stories or accounts of events are all important. Stories may be illustrative of reality, or indeed attempt to reflect how they the narrator felt reality ought to be. For instance, in one of my interviews an introductory question about working on the

³ The Voice Of The Past, By P. Thompson, Pp8

⁴ The Peculiarities Of Oral History, By A. Portelli, History Workshop No.12 Autumn 1981

⁵ The Voice Of The Past By Paul Thompson, p98

track brought out a rather fanciful response:

Kate: "Did your job ever involve working on a moving track, I understand around that date, it became the 'in thing' at GBC."

Rosita: "Oh yee that was in Spon St. Well I can tell you we soon put an end to it. We used to drop screws in the track to stop it. Well the job took one and a half minutes to finish and then the track moved on to the next girl, then another one and a half minutes and the track moves on (puts great emphasis on track moves on). And then we found out if a couple of screws were dropped into it, it gave you three minutes instead of one and a half. So every so often when we wanted a smoke we just dropped on a screw."⁶

I have doubts that this was a completely factual account of what happened. There are several reasons for my doubts. Firstly, other oral evidence suggests that the Spon St plant was highly disciplined and tightly managed. I have no doubt that there was resistance but I doubt that the system was controlled by the women in the way R... illustrates. Secondly I was given other accounts of resistance at the Spon St plant where I was told that the track was actually disrupted so that the engineers had to be called. There seemed to have been good reasons for preferring these accounts as more closer to what actually happened. Nevertheless, I consider Rosita's story to be highly important, because it displayed the underlying desire, the need to say that reality should be different - had women the power they would subvert the system.

Thus oral history evidence may illustrate a variety of preoccupations and forms of consciousness, interwoven with a range of experiences, but must be presented and interpreted with care. Such presentation and interpretation can draw both on a wider range of oral recollections and on documentary sources. For instance the oral history evidence told me that female inspectors were subject to a set of particular discriminatory practices which operated to cloak their expertise and to undermine their earnings, and a careful scrutiny of some trade union minutes of works conferences several entries making this point.

⁶ Interview with R.

A final major aspect of oral testimony which deserves specific comment concerns the contrast conceptions through which the past is often viewed. Often there is some romanticisation of the past, though this seems to accompany the living through difficult times. One of my major concerns in the thesis is to do justice both to the mundane and the more deeply felt dimensions of my respondents' recollections and testimony.

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I have interviewed forty-two women workers to whom I have pledged confidentiality. However there are some details about the respondents in the first chapter. Refer to page- 304 - 307

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THE EXPERIENCES OF CLASS AND GENDER RELATIONS AND WOMEN WORKERS

AT GEC 1945-1965

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INSTITUTION
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(1990)

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